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**School of Applied Social Studies,
University College Cork,
Ireland**

An Exploration into the Educational Experiences of Children in Foster Care in Ireland

Sarah McGree, BsocSc

Abstract

The focus of this research is on the education of children who are in long term care. Specifically, it addresses gaps in existing literature in relation to the educational experiences for children who are in foster care in Ireland. It considers what obstacles children in the care of the state face in pursuing primary, secondary and third level education. It also explores how the Irish educational system currently meets the needs of children who are in long-term care and questions how the education experiences of children in long term care might be improved. The research indicates that social workers, foster parents and other professionals in a child in care's life must never underestimate the power and influence they have on a child's experiences, both educationally and holistically.

Keywords: Educational experiences; educational outcomes; barriers to educational participation.

Introduction

The Irish Foster Care Association defines fostering as 'caring for someone else's child in one's own home – providing family life for a child who, for one reason or another, cannot live with his or her own parents, either on a short or a long term basis. Foster parents/carers provide a stable family environment, nurturing the child to help him or

her develop and succeed' (IFCA, 2012). A major indicator of a child's capacity for 'developing' and 'succeeding' falls under the provision of education for these looked after children. In the world we live in today, education is an essential part of each individual's life. If education is seen to have potential to improve life chances and one's ability to contribute to society, then it seems that education is imperative to children in care to lead them to a productive adulthood.

Kelly and Gilligan (2000) in their research found that the 'in-care' label and stigma was one of the major hurdles for looked after children in education. It was found from studies on British children in care that 'teachers automatically lower their expectations because of the care "label" even where this is not warranted' (Kelly and Gilligan, 2000, p.79). This research explores the different obstacles, such as stigma, that children in care face when pursuing an education. Kelly and Gilligan (2000, p.79) found that, 'surprisingly it was not a missed relationship with biological parents which the children in care found hardest, but the absence of acceptance and inclusion in the foster home' and this argument deserves further research and expansion. The relationships that children in care encounter are investigated in detail to establish how these relationships can affect the children's educational experiences. Finally, an analysis of the welfare and education structures for children in care was conducted.

There exists a wide range of policies and in Ireland which children in care can benefit from, yet we do not have any tailored policies relating to children in care and their education. Children who are placed in care usually originate from disadvantaged backgrounds and then may be placed in homes that are not seen to be disadvantaged. Irish legislation needs to take into account children in care who have been subjected to disadvantage along with those who are currently disadvantaged. For example, all of the services provided under the DEIS scheme are only available to children in DEIS schools. Unfortunately as this scheme and its services are targeted to areas and schools of disadvantage rather than to individual pupils' circumstances, there are many children who would greatly benefit from services such as the HSCL, Síolta or others but are not eligible to avail of the DEIS scheme because of where they live.

Methodology

As ethical issues were a major concern in relation to interviewing children in care and/or their foster carers, I chose a methodology focused on interviews with young adults over eighteen who were previously in care, social workers and school principals and teachers who work closely with children in care. My chosen method of research was in the form of interviews, which allowed me to gain a deeper insight into the educational experiences encountered by children in care. The interviews were open ended with the majority of the questions leaving room for the interviewee to expand their answer to accommodate their own experiences.

Overall nine interviews were conducted. Interviews were conducted with three social workers who had between 20-25 children each on their case load, two young adults who were previously in care for three years, the principal and teacher of a special school who had 11 children in care in their school, and the principal and guidance counsellor of a mainstream secondary school who had 7 children in care in their school. Each interview was structured around achieving answers to my aims and objectives.

The main issue which was encountered during the research was respecting ethical boundaries and ensuring all aspects of the research were completely ethical. There are so many ethical issues relating to interviewing children under eighteen in care such as ‘encroachment on privacy, confidentiality, safety and care’ (Bell, 2010, p.45) that it was concluded that it would be better for the research to interview young adults over eighteen. To ensure that all ethical issues were respected, all of the interviewees were over eighteen and were fully informed before the interview. The ethical issues did not concern the young people only; sensitivity about confidentiality and anonymity was imperative with all of the interviewees. In order to protect the anonymity of the research participants, pseudonyms are used.

All interviewees were provided with a consent form at the start of each interview to ‘explain that participation was voluntary, that participants were free to refuse to answer any question and could withdraw from the interview at any time’ (Bell, 2010, p.46). Each interviewee was also given a summary of the research which further explained what the research entailed. The interviews only commenced once the

interviewees had read the consent form and the summary of research and had indicated that they were fully comfortable with proceeding. As an outcome of these interviews, a profound understanding was gained into the educational experiences for children in care and the obstacles that they incur in pursuing an education. The findings and analysis from these interviews have been divided into three sections: (1) relationships, (2) obstacles and (3) analysis of the welfare and education structures for children in care.

Relationships

Relationships with School

The two young people whom I interviewed experienced little disruption in their education when they were placed in care. Mary (pseudonym) was fifteen and was in fourth year in school, while her sister Laura (pseudonym) was in second year and was fourteen years of age. The girls did not have to move school when they were placed in care and continued on as they had been before. Laura said when she was placed in care she felt ‘there was more control; you knew you wouldn’t be up all night dealing with things.’ The two girls also had a younger sister; fortunately they were all placed in the one foster home, not too far away from where they originally lived. When Laura was asked did she enjoy school she responded, ‘I loved school. It was an escape.’

Both girls agreed that school was their safe place. They had a sense of normality there and it was where they got to meet their friends every day. The social workers supported this view. All three of the social workers who were interviewed stated if the child does not have to move schools while being placed in care then school is their only stable environment and for some their only sense of normality and continuity. Like the girls that I spoke with the social workers informed me that the friends of children in care act almost like another family. They are there for them through their times of need and are able to support them emotionally and a lot of the time academically too.

The social workers also have a very strong connection with the schools. Social Worker Curran (pseudonym) highlighted that ‘having a close relationship with the schools also informs social workers if the foster parents are playing an active role in

the children's education.' The principals of both schools informed me that most schools have a very open door policy in relation to contact with social workers. All the social workers that I spoke with stated that the schools use the social workers as a support to aid them and guide them while the social workers look to the schools for information on how a child is progressing.

While the two girls that I spoke with described school as their safe place, the social workers assured me that unfortunately this is not always the case. Social worker Murphy (pseudonym) informed me that for some children school is very difficult. Usually children who are doing well in school and have friends enjoy it but sadly not all children find school so easy. She stated that it can be particularly difficult for children with learning difficulties as they may struggle both academically and socially. She stated that 'children can have poor social skills as a result of learning difficulties and almost half of the children in care have learning difficulties. The intellectual side is supported in the school by SNAs and extra resources but they lack social support.' This can then have negative effects on their experiences in education.

Relationships with Foster Parents

The two sisters whom I spoke with had very different relationships with their foster carers. Mary described her relationship with her foster parents as 'fine at first, I mean at the beginning it was great. People are always really nice when you first meet them, we could do whatever we wanted and eat whatever we wanted.' Mary went on to identify how things began to change when she started to clash with her foster father, which resulted in her leaving her foster placement.

Laura described a much different relationship with her foster carers. 'I get on with them an awful lot better than Mary did. I was quite close with our foster mother and I still have regular contact with her. Our younger sister still lives with her too and she also has a good relationship with her. I think Mary just clashed with them.' Despite their diverse relationships, both girls said that they would never turn to their foster parents for help with school work and similarly, they never offered either. Daly and Gilligan (2005) pointed out that lack of attention to foster children's educational need by foster parents and social workers, along with other factors, results in children in care having lower educational attainment compared to their peers.

Relationships with Social Workers

Both of the young girls I spoke with did not have great relationships with their social workers. Mary identified that ‘our social workers were not really people we would turn to. Our first social worker was a man so I didn’t feel comfortable talking to him. The questions that social workers have to ask can be really irritating and they’re always writing down everything you say so I never felt like I could express myself. It always felt like more of an interview or something.’

Young care leaver Laura expressed concerns about their social workers not having enough time. ‘I suppose our male social worker, that took down everything we said really frustrated me. I remember he was so awkward. He never made us feel like he was someone we could talk to. I remember I said something one day in the car after a meeting and he took out a pen and was like could you say that again.’ The girls gave the impression that their social workers were not approachable and they would always have turned to friends rather than their social workers.

The two girls’ relationships with the social workers did not match the picture painted by the social workers about their role. The social workers all seemed to believe that how the children in care viewed them was hugely influenced by the foster parents and birth parents views of the social workers. Social worker Lawlor stated that ‘social workers have a counselling role, more of a befriending type counselling relationship. Children who are very happy and settled with their foster parents do not want to see a social worker but yet we have to make sure that every child knows that we can be contacted and they can talk to us in confidence. Most social workers have a good working relationship with the children on their case load.’ This report conflicts with what the two girls experienced.

Relationships with Peers

The two girls that I interviewed highlighted the importance of peers and siblings in their success in education. Both girls used each other as a support throughout school and in their journey to third level. Apart from the help and guidance that they gave each other, both girls viewed their peers as a constant pillar of support throughout their time in care. This type of support which the two girls relied on so strongly

unfortunately is not there for all children in care. Drawing on the descriptions of the two girls about their relationships with each other and their peers it is clear that the value of sibling and peer support is indispensable. Unfortunately social worker Murphy highlighted that for some children in care making friends and having a support mechanism like the two girls I interviewed is not so easy. Some children in care, mainly those who have moved around a lot and have never experienced a stable environment, find it quite difficult to firstly interact with peers and secondly trust them. This lack of support can make even the easiest day to day tasks seem daunting. Emond (2002) highlighted that the disruption of schooling not only affects educational outcomes for young people, but also affects relationships formed with teachers and peers.

Obstacles Encountered in Relationships

An issue which prevailed throughout the research is the constant rebuilding of relationships. Some children move between foster homes, meeting new foster carers on a regular basis. Some children move between schools, constantly having to form new friendships with peers and teachers. Unfortunately from the information I received in my interviews, nearly all children are moved between social workers.

Another issue which prevailed during the interviews was children internalising what has happened to them as rejection. The more a child moves between schools and families subsequently results in the child having more emotional baggage which can be very difficult for any child of that age. The principal of the mainstream school added that ‘the constant changing of environments can leave a child feeling very uncertain. The children become unsure of what to expect next and often fear the worst. This is often reflected back on their school work.’

Obstacles

Learning Disabilities

A sad statistic that over 50% of children in care in the North Tipperary area have learning disabilities was highlighted by social worker Curran. This fact was learned after an educational study was conducted in the area in 2010. Curran added that the majority of the learning difficulties that she encounters are as a result of being inherited from one generation to the next but sadly they may also be a result of

exposure to poor environmental conditions at a young age. She stated that ‘children who come into care at a later stage can often find school harder than other children their age. This is usually a result of a lack of educational encouragement in their birth home.’

Learning disabilities affect children in care at school in many different ways. The principal of the special school highlighted one of the major issues relating to learning disabilities and the children’s schooling which is foster parents’ lack of understanding of the disability. She also added that ‘an issue that sometimes arises is when a child with a learning difficulty goes into foster care is that the foster carer thinks that the child isn’t learning because they have had a dysfunctional upbringing and they don’t grasp the fact that the child actually has a learning disability.’ It is usually as a result of very eager foster parents who take it upon themselves to interfere in the child’s learning. The principal of the special school told me of cases where the foster parents would come into the school looking for more homework, asking what the child is taught and starting private tuition. She believes that foster parents like this fail to take on board that the child has a learning disability. Unfortunately carers like this can send a message to the child that they have not been taught properly and that the learning disability has been done to them and the child forgets that it is part of their inability to be able to learn. According to the special school principal, as a result of carers’ over eagerness for the child to learn they can subsequently damage the child’s confidence and the child can get very resentful about their disability and can even blame their natural family for their learning difficulty.

As a result of a lack of understanding of learning difficulties these foster parents can isolate the children from their school and also further alienated them from their birth parents. It is cases like this that highlight the severe importance of foster parents having a clear understanding of learning disabilities and especially the abilities of the child in their care. Markwick and Parrish also highlighted the importance of understanding learning disabilities. ‘How people approach people with a learning disability is largely dependent upon how they view them and what understanding they have of the disability.’ (Markwick and Parrish, 2003, p.179) It is indescribable how important it is to for schools and carers to understand a child’s ability in order for a child to have the best experiences possible at school. There is a great need for foster

parents and mainstream school staff to have a complete understanding of learning difficulties. Markwick and Parrish (2003) also illustrated the importance of understanding such learning difficulties and how understanding and supporting people diagnosed with a learning disability can help them to achieve their goals.

Leaving Certificate Applied Verses Leaving Certificate

Along with schools needing to understand a child's needs and abilities there is also a requirement for schools to encourage children in care to achieve their full potential. From speaking with social workers who collectively have 133 children under their care I found that it is quite common for children in care to have unacceptable low expectations of themselves. This is again heightened by the low expectations the schools have for them.

Such under-estimations of capabilities can often result in children who are fully capable of doing the Leaving Certificate opting for the Leaving Cert Applied because to them it is seen as the easy option. Social worker Lawlor stated that 'a shameful amount of bright children are doing the Leaving Cert Applied and this again comes back to their own expectations of themselves and the expectations of the school. I often wonder do we passively leave them off to do something easy instead of challenging them.' On the other hand social worker Murphy highlighted that 'when children who have learning difficulties enter the leaving cert years they struggle hugely to keep up with the curriculum and can become lost. This can have knock-on effects on their self-esteem and confidence.' It is good for some children but for other children who have the potential of completing a Leaving Certificate it may be seen as the easier option; Murphy continued that this can result in 'the programme being abused.' Yet with this said all who I spoke with agreed that they would prefer to see a child doing the Leaving Cert Applied rather than drop out of school.

It seems that when children have a strong placement and the necessary supports socially, emotionally and academically the standard Leaving Certificate is well within their reach and third level may also be on the cards for them.

Analysis of the Welfare and Education Structures for Children in Care in Ireland

Leaving School at Eighteen

The research has shown that the number of children in care who leave school once they turn eighteen, before completing their Leaving Certificate, are hugely influenced and encouraged by our social welfare system. Speaking to social workers and to the mainstream school principal and counsellor there was a unanimous agreement that our current welfare system and its benefits can often be an incentive for young people who lack prospects for themselves to leave school early. It seems there is a gap between the education system and the welfare system.

Social worker Lawlor expressed her frustration about this issue. At the time of the interview, Lawlor had a girl who was going through the process of leaving school. The social worker, foster parents and especially the school had put time and resources into this particular student and as soon as she turned eighteen in December of her final year she decided to leave school. Just six months away from completing her Leaving Certificate. Just before the girl had turned eighteen the social worker and her team went to great lengths to ensure that this girl had a secure placement to finish out her schooling, all supports were in place for her to finish, but she refused. The social worker pleaded with her to continue on until June but the girl replied that all she wanted was her own house and her own money - her own house being a council house and her only money being social welfare. Despite the school and social workers' best efforts, the welfare system prevailed as an incentive. Unfortunately this girl will now miss out on the support and knowledge that she would have gained if she had chosen to finish school.

For many of these children who leave school early the reasons behind them leaving revert back to their self-esteem and the perceptions they have about themselves. The social workers believe that many of the children who decide to leave school early grew up watching their parents and relatives rely on the welfare system and believe that a life reliant on welfare is all that they are capable of. It is devastating for schools, social workers and foster parents who put endless time into getting the most of out the children in care and supporting their education. But sadly once the children in care turn eighteen they are adults in society and have the right to make their own decisions. Drawing on what I have been told by the social workers, those who opt to

leave school and their foster parents at eighteen appear to just want to get out of being in care and no longer want to be a foster child.

Policy Verses Practice

Policy verses practice was a recurring finding throughout this research. The main concern in relation to this is that in theory there are many policies to cover a wide range of needs of children and children in care, ranging from SNAs to psycho educational assessments, but unfortunately due to cuts in funding and lack of resources these policies are not being followed through to practice. The research has also highlighted that due to the way the policies are implemented some children miss out on services which would greatly benefit their education; the prime example of this is DEIS supports being allocated by area rather than needs/backgrounds of the children.

There are many cases where Irish policies are not followed through in terms of practice or where they may simply not be realistic in terms of practice. The issue of children centred policies is a primary example of this. The next issue concerns the child in care's reviews and meetings and how child centred are they actually in practice? The special school principal stated that these reviews 'start out being very child centred but it is 'text book' child centred.' She then added that 'it is totally unnatural for a young child to sit down at a big table with about 10 adults to talk about themselves. It's stressful for an adult never mind a child.' When a child of any age, especially a child with a learning disability is placed in a situation like they are during an in care review meeting they become anxious and feel like they have to answer any question that they are asked. All of the professionals who are involved in the child's care attend review meetings. During the meeting each professional would have different questions to put to the children. The special school principal stated 'many of the questions that the child is asked I would often have difficulty understanding myself, so I can only imagine how difficult a young child with a learning disability finds it to process such information. From my experience the children usually pick up on one maybe two words out of the whole sentence and run with them to give back an answer.' The special school principal added that during the meetings the child they know is a completely different child, she feels that they are under such pressure to give back an answer that they will say anything to get the

focus and attention off them. They can sometimes even make up stuff just to break the deadlock and to provide the answer that is expected of them.

The unfortunate factor in this is that all the professionals who attend these meetings follow the 'text book child centre' approach. This means they take note of everything the child tells them and they subsequently make decisions in regard to the child from the answers the child gives them when the answer may not actually have any substance to it. Butler and Roberts (2004, p.231) described their views on child centred policies stating 'the aims and the outcomes of the processes are quite separate from the needs and wishes of the child, but the child's involvement is required in order to facilitate the process and to ensure it is 'child centred'. This often results in the child being not so much the centre of activity but, rather, caught between those activities in which the adults are engaged, a kind of 'piggy in the middle'.

It is evident that there is currently a major cavity in the delivery of policies and the provision of support for children in care in Ireland. The lack of accurate implementation of policies is distressing. In conjunction with this the theories behind some of the child centred practices are just not practical and are resulting in negative effects on the care plans and thus the experiences of children in care.

Conclusion

A recurring theme to emerge from the research was the importance of supporting stable relationships in order for a child in care to have positive experiences during their schooling. The research also highlighted the importance of the role of foster carers and the significance of continuity and stability of care placements, schools, social workers and relationships in the lives of children in care during their time in education. Positive relationships increase a young person's self-esteem and confidence which enable them to have positive experiences free from major obstacles throughout their education.

The perceptions of children in care and the lowered expectation of them by schools was a theme highlighted by Kelly and Gilligan in the literature and was confirmed during the research process by social workers. Such perceptions have been seen to have devastating effects on the children in care and what they experience in school.

The low expectations lower the child's confidence in their own ability and can lead to a child passively opting for the Leaving Certificate Applied or even dropping out of school.

Learning disabilities were highlighted by social workers as a major obstacle for children in care. All the social workers who I spoke with highlighted that a lack of importance placed on education and lack of support from a young age can lead to learning difficulties. Unfortunately then they emphasised how such learning difficulties, especially undiagnosed difficulties can lead to the child struggling both academically and socially. The importance of a strong and supportive relationship with foster parents was again pointed out in relation to giving a child who is struggling the best encouragement to motivate them to achieve their potential.

The research has underlined gaps in policies and government supports. The main gap was between child protection policies and government support policies. The issue of children who are disadvantaged but cannot avail of educational disadvantage supports because of where they live was brought to light. Another gap was also illustrated between the educational system and the welfare system. Students prematurely leaving school once they turn eighteen was another concern which was raised. The research highlighted that our welfare system can sometimes act as an incentive for young people to leave school early once they turn eighteen.

When social workers take a child out of the care of their birth parents and place them in a foster home they are effectively saying that on behalf of the HSE the foster parents who they place the child with can raise the child better than the birth parents can. After conducting this research I have to ask are the social workers achieving this goal. One social worker I interview stated that 'finding a suitable home for the children who are placed in our care is a difficult task and I have to admit, unfortunately we don't always get it right. Sometimes it even takes changing placements a few times before we find a suitable match.' It is this constant moving, changing and having to rebuild relationships that have devastating effects on a child's experiences in education. I feel social workers should have to constantly revisit their methods and approaches when working with vulnerable children. Social workers, foster parents and other professionals in a child in care's life must never

underestimate the power and influence they have on a child's experiences in education and in life.

Recommendations

The findings of this research shaped a range of suggested interventions as follows:

- The establishment of a data base in all HSE regions of the objective collection of educational outcomes for all children in their care. In order to resolve issues a child may experience in school the HSE needs to first know all the obstacles which the children in care encounter.
- The introduction of constant, on-going training and evaluations for foster carers to ensure the care and support that they provide is to the highest standards and meets the needs of the children in their care.
- On initial admission to care each child should undergo an educational and psychological assessment in order to identify the areas of deficit in their education so far and to identify trauma from pre-care and in care experiences that may impact their ability to learn. Such assessments could also guide the social workers to place the child in a more compatible foster home.
- SNA's and counsellors should be reintroduced into schools and should be readily available for all children who need them, especially children in care.
- Extra support should be provided for children coming up to their eighteenth birthday and after to ensure they are supported to stay in school and encouraged to make the most out of their education.
- Child centred policies should be assessed and reviewed to see exactly how well they are functioning and if they are benefiting the child in practice.

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