

# **COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE**

**SONIA JACKSON**

**THE 2nd MACQUARIE STREET LECTURE FOR  
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE  
31 OCTOBER 2001**

**Report 5/52  
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# **Members of the Committee on Children and Young People**

Mr David Campbell M.P. (Chair), Member for Keira

The Hon. Peter Primose, M.L.C. (Vice-Chair)

Ms Diane Beamer M.P., Member for Mulgoa

Ms Marie Andrews M.P., Member for Peats

Mr Wayne Smith M.P., Member for South Coast

Mr Stephen O'Doherty M.P., Member for Hornsby

Mr Peter Webb M.P., Member for Monaro

Jan Burnswoods, M.L.C.

The Hon. Don Harwin, M.L.C.

The Hon. Henry Tsang, M.L.C.

The Hon. Alan Corbett, M.L.C.



## Staff of the Committee on Children and Young People

Manager

Mr Ian Faulks

Committee Officer

Ms Violeta Brdaroska

Assistant Committee Officer

Ms Susan Tanzer

## **Chair's foreword**

### **David Campbell MP, Member for Keira Chair, Committee on Children and Young People**

As part of the ongoing promotion of discussion and research into matters affecting children and young people in New South Wales, one of the first actions agreed by the Committee was to commence a series of lectures - sponsored by the Committee - on issues relating to children and young people, under the series title of "The Macquarie Street Lectures on Children and Young People".

This report publishes the second of this ongoing series of Macquarie Street Lectures on Children and Young People, addressing educational issues associated with children placed into out-of-home care in the United Kingdom.

The lecture was presented by Professor Sonia Jackson MA CQSW AcSS. Professor Jackson is a Professorial Fellow of the Institute of Education, University of London, where she directs an innovative action research project encouraging young people from care to go to university and providing them with financial and practical support.

Professor Jackson has had a diverse career, including her appointment to the Chair of Social Studies at the University of Wales Swansea, as well as working as a clinical psychologist, teacher, education adviser, social worker and university lecturer. She has always campaigned for an interdisciplinary approach to children's services and in addition to her work on the education of children in residential and foster care she was responsible for setting up the first British degree course in Early Childhood Studies. She has written extensively on a broad range of child-related issues. Her most recent publications are 'What Works in Creating Stability for Looked After Children'; 'Nobody Ever Told Us School Mattered' and 'Better Education, Better Futures'.

Professor Jackson's lecture is of direct relevance to an examination of the education of children and young people in out-of-home care in New South Wales and the need to positive educational outcomes for children and young people in care.

Historically, the educational needs of children and young people in care have been largely ignored, with unfortunate consequences for longer term well-being, social bonding and sense of connectedness in later adolescence and adulthood.



## **Acknowledgments**

The Committee on Children and Young People acknowledges the work of UntingCare Burnside in highlighting the particular educational needs of young people in care, in seeking to develop strategies and commitment that is necessary to effectively address these educational needs, and in promoting linkages and alliances between agencies - including both the Commission for Children and Young People and the Committee on Children and Young People - that can serve to facilitate more positive outcomes in this area.

I would like to thank my fellow Members of the Committee for their bipartisan approach to this report, as is the case with the general work and deliberations of the Committee. It is truly a pleasure for me to work with them.

I am grateful for the assistance of the Committee Secretariat: the Manager, Mr Ian Faulks, Ms Violeta Brdaroska, Committee Officer, and Ms Susan Tanzer, Assistant Committee Officer.

I commend this report to Parliament.

## Contents

	Pages
Members of the Committee on Children and Young People .....	2-3
Chair's foreword .....	5-6
Sonia Jackson The importance of education for children in out-of-home care .....	9-12
Extracts of the Minutes of the Committee on Children and Young People .....	13-18



# **THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE**

**SONIA JACKSON**

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. I hope our experience in the United Kingdom may be of some help in your efforts to tackle the very intractable problem of the low educational attainment of children in foster and residential care. In the last few years we have made considerable progress in Britain, and I am glad to be able to tell you about some of the most recent developments.

It has not been an easy process. Getting the subject on the agenda is the first hurdle. In the United Kingdom it took almost 20 years before policy-makers began to realise that it was a vital issue. Why does it matter so much? Because in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in all developed societies adults with poor education have very limited life chances. For children who have spent any length of time in care it is even more serious than that. Without family support young people who fail educationally are at very high risk of dropping out of mainstream society altogether.

The United Kingdom statistics on outcomes for young people who have been in public care make grim reading: 80% aged 16 to 24 are unemployed; 54% of young offenders have been in care; 40% of girls aged 15 to 17 in prison were formerly in care, and seven out of ten homeless young people. Almost a quarter of young women leaving care between 16 and 18 are pregnant or already have a child, and of course there is a strong probability that those children will repeat the pattern of their parents.

For many years the British government was unwilling to recognise these facts but the present government has fully acknowledged them and accepted its responsibility to change the situation. At present there is a very big gap between the average achievement of care leavers and that of the general population. Just to give you an indication, over half of all schoolchildren now pass the 16 year old public examination equivalent to your School Certificate with top grades, compared with only 7% of children in care. Indeed, 75% of children leave care with no qualifications at all, while only 12% continue in education compared with 68% of all children.

There is a popular misconception, which I have found exists here too, that children come into care because they have done something wrong. In fact the

vast majority – 95% in Britain – are victims of abuse or family misfortune and are in no way responsible for the circumstances that bring them into care.

The histories of these children often make horrific reading, but in case we get discouraged we should remind ourselves that young people can be extraordinarily resilient. Comparing those that survive care to become integrated members of society and those who do not we find that education is the key factor.

I would like to tell you about three young people I met in the course of my research. Isabel was born in Holloway, the notorious women's prison in London. Her mother abandoned her in a brothel when she was three months old. At five she was placed for adoption with a woman who abused and finally rejected her. After 36 different foster and residential placements she was sent, 15 and pregnant, to live alone in a bedsit. She had attended school for only six months during this time, but had always been passionately fond of reading and this, she told me, was her salvation. She educated herself with help from a sympathetic English teacher in a Further Education College. Last year she graduated with a degree in Psychology from the London School of Economics. She is an excellent mother to her ten year old son.

Anna came into care with her brother when she was 10. Her father left and her mother developed a severe psychotic illness. Anna had cared for her brother since he was a baby and knew that he suffered from severe asthma and how to deal with it. Unfortunately nobody would listen to her and the little boy died of an asthma attack. Anna sat all day in the hall of her residential unit waiting for the social worker to take her to her brother's funeral, but nobody came.

She thinks it was her grief and anger that gave her the determination to become a teacher and fight her way through university with no support or encouragement. One Christmas she had nowhere to go and spent the whole holiday sleeping in a railway station. She has just completed her PhD comparing the education of children in care in Canada and Britain.

Clive was an only child, like both his parents. His mother died of cancer, his father was killed in a road accident and there was nowhere for him to go except a residential unit. He had been doing well at school, aiming for university and was amazed to find that no one in the children's home took the slightest interest in his education. He was expected to leave as soon as possible and get a job. He had great difficulty in finding space and quiet to do his homework, even paper to write on, but at least he was able to stay at the same school, which he said was his lifeline. With their help he went to university, did well after a false start and is now, despite his youth, a high-ranking civil servant.

Of course these are three exceptional individuals, but how many more success stories might there be if we gave the kind of educational support to children in out-of-home care that they need and deserve.

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From what I have learnt during my travels round Australia over the past month the position here may not be quite so bleak, but I believe you would find that Australian children in care experience many of the same school and educational problems as those in the United Kingdom. It is interesting to note that in many European countries children and young people in out of home care do as well or better than those living at home. For example in Germany 58% of care leavers pass the Abitur, the examination taken at 18 which is considerably more demanding than your Higher School Certificate or our A levels. This may be related to the high educational qualifications required of residential workers and foster carers. In Poland foster carers are required to have a university degree.

Earlier this year the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, personally ordered the Social Exclusion Unit of the Cabinet Office to conduct an inquiry into the low educational attainment of children in care and to report early in 2002 on how it can be raised.

This inquiry is building on a great deal of research and practice knowledge that has now been accumulated in the United Kingdom and much progress has already been made. An early initiative of the government was the Quality Protects program, which was a comprehensive strategy for improving outcomes for children in out-of-home care, including their education. In launching the program, the then Secretary of State for Health, Frank Dobson, wrote to every elected council representative in England, saying that education success was the single most important indicator of the quality of parenting that children received when living away from home.

Since then there have been many further initiatives – in fact child welfare workers and managers complain that they have been bombarded with initiatives – but we can already see the improvements they have brought about. Last year, for the first time ever, the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Employment issued Joint Guidance on the Education of Children and Young People in Public Care. Although it is called guidance some elements of it have statutory force. For example it specifies that all children are entitled to full-time schooling. They must have an educational placement within 20 days. Every school must appoint a designated teacher with special responsibility for children in out-of-home care. One of the strongest points about the guidance is that it is evidence-based – every one of its recommendations is backed by research.

The big step forward this year is the *Children Leaving Care Act*, which makes local authorities responsible for providing financial and other forms of support to young people who have been in their care up to the age of 21, and longer if they are still in full-time education.

So although we are very far from solving the problem, we have succeeded in raising it high on the political agenda and allocating substantial resources towards tackling it.

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How has it been done? To a large extent by making people aware of the facts, by drawing attention to the appalling neglect of children's education in care and by showing how things could be changed. Until recently this information came from small-scale research projects but now the government is collecting detailed statistics on the educational performance of children in care compared with the age group so that we will have a firm basis from which to measure progress.

We also have research which gives us a good idea of the key factors in raising attainment. Very briefly, these are:

- All departments and non-Governmental organisations (NGOs) working closely together.
- Informing schools and teachers about the issues facing children away from home.
- Convincing child welfare and community services workers of the need to make education central to their work.
- Recruiting better educated foster carers and residential workers.
- Creating an educational care environment.
- Keeping children in mainstream school.
- Promoting reading and literacy skills.
- Encouraging out-of-school interests and recreational activities.
- Engaging the support of birth parents and other relatives and friends.

But above all convincing children themselves of the vital importance of education for their present and future lives, and giving them the self-esteem and belief in themselves that will enable them to succeed.

So what might you do to take things forward here in New South Wales? One thing that politicians are very well placed to do is to call for information. Finding out the facts is the first step towards bringing about change. Once you have reliable information on the educational attainment of children in your care and how it compares with children in the general population you will be in a position to act on it. From what I know of Burnside they will be very willing to help. I wish you all success in your efforts to give children in care a better chance in life.

## **EXTRACTS OF THE MINUTES OF THE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

The relevant Minutes of the Committee on Children and Young People are included:

Meeting No. 14      Thursday 25 October 2001

Meeting No. 15      Thursday 6 December 2001





# COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

## PROCEEDINGS

**9:30 A.M., THURSDAY 25 OCTOBER 2001  
AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE, SYDNEY**

### MEMBERS PRESENT

#### *Legislative Council*

Mr Primrose  
Mr Tsang  
Mr Harwin  
Ms Burnswoods

#### *Legislative Assembly*

Mr Campbell  
Mr Smith  
Ms Andrews  
Mr Webb

The Chair, Mr Campbell, presiding.

Also in attendance: Mr Faulks, Committee Manager, Ms Brdaroska, Committee Officer, and Ms Tanzer, Assistant Committee Officer.

### **1. Apologies**

Apologies were received from Mr Corbett, Ms Beamer, and Mr O'Doherty.

### **2. Previous Minutes**

On the motion of Ms Burnswoods, seconded by Mr Primrose, the minutes of meeting No. 13, having been distributed previously, were amended and accepted unanimously as being a true and accurate record.

### **3. Chairman's report**

#### *2nd Macquarie Street Lecture on Children and Young People*

The Chair noted that he had received a letter from Ms Gillian Calvert, Commissioner for Children and Young People, requesting the Committee host a luncheon and lecture by Professor Sonia Jackson on Wednesday 31 October 2001 on the topic of raising the educational attainment of children in care. The Chair noted that the Committee had previously resolved to invite Mr Ken Lanning to present a lecture on the internet and the sexual abuse of children

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as the 2nd Macquarie Street Lecture on Children and Young People, but Mr Lanning's visit had been cancelled due to family illness. It was agreed that Professor Jackson's lecture would be a suitable replacement for Mr Lanning as the 2nd Macquarie Street Lecture on Children and Young People.

#### **4. General business**

There being no further business, the Chair closed the meeting at 10:00 a.m.

**Chair**

**Manager**

# COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

## *PROCEEDINGS*

**9:30 A.M., THURSDAY 6 DECEMBER 2001  
AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE, SYDNEY**

### MEMBERS PRESENT

#### *Legislative Council*

Ms Burnswoods  
Mr Primrose  
Mr Harwin  
Mr Tsang  
Mr Corbett

#### *Legislative Assembly*

Mr Campbell  
Ms Andrews  
Mr Webb  
Mr Smith  
Ms Beamer

The Chairman, Mr Campbell, presiding.

Also in attendance: Mr Faulks, Committee Manager, Ms Brdaroska, Committee Officer, and Ms Tanzer, Assistant Committee Officer.

### **1. Apologies**

Apologies were received from Mr O'Doherty.

### **2. Previous Minutes**

On the motion of Mr Primrose, seconded by Mr Smith, the minutes of meeting No. 14, having been distributed previously, were accepted unanimously as being a true and accurate record.

### **3. Chair's report**

The Chair reported that Professor Sonia Jackson made a presentation to the Committee at a luncheon on Wednesday 31 October 2001. The Commissioner for Children and Young People attended the presentation, as did members of the Expert Advisory Panel of the Commission for Children and Young People.

**4. Consideration of the Chair's draft report: "The importance of education for children in out-of-home care. Sonia Jackson - The 2nd Macquarie Street Lecture on Children and Young People, 31 October 2001"**

The Chair presented the draft report: "The importance of education for children in out-of-home care. Sonia Jackson - The 2nd Macquarie Street Lecture on Children and Young People, 31 October 2001" (Report 5/52).

The draft report, have previously been distributed to Members, was accepted as being read.

The Committee proceeded to deliberate on the draft report in globo:

Chapter 1 - The importance of education for children in out-of-home care: read and agreed to

On the motion of Ms Burnswoods, seconded Mr Corbett:

That the draft report: "The importance of education for children in out-of-home care. Sonia Jackson - The 2nd Macquarie Street Lecture on Children and Young People, 31 October 2001", be read and agreed to.

Passed unanimously.

On the motion of Ms Burnswoods, seconded Mr Corbett:

That the draft report: "The importance of education for children in out-of-home care. Sonia Jackson - The 2nd Macquarie Street Lecture on Children and Young People, 31 October 2001" be accepted as a report of the Committee on Children and Young People, and that it be signed by the Chair and presented to the House.

Passed unanimously.

On the motion of Ms Burnswoods, seconded Mr Corbett:

That the Chair and Manager be permitted to correct any stylistic, typographical and grammatical errors in the report.

Passed unanimously.

**5. General business**

There being no further business, the Committee adjourned at 11:30 a.m.

**Chairman**

**Manager**

# REPORTS OF THE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The first steps ... Review of the first annual report of the Commission for Children and Young People, for the 1999-2000 financial year. (Report 1/52, May 2001).

The global agenda for children - what role is there for us? Michael Jarman - The 1st Macquarie Street Lecture for Children and Young People, 6 April 2001. (Report 2/52, May 2001).

The development of wellbeing in children – some aspects of research and comment on child and adolescent development. Proceedings of a seminar, Parliament House, Sydney, 7 March 2001. (Report 3/52, June 2001).

Amendments to the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998* and *Commission for Children and Young People Regulation 2000* regarding employment screening. (Report 4/52, October 2001).

The importance of education for children in out-of-home care. Sonia Jackson - The 2nd Macquarie Street Lecture for Children and Young People, 31 October 2001 (Report 5/52, December 2001).

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