

**Submission
No 65**

**INQUIRY INTO TRANSITION SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS
WITH ADDITIONAL OR COMPLEX NEEDS AND THEIR
FAMILIES**

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Are We Making the Grade? The Education of Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care

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This material in this submission was taken directly from my PhD thesis (Townsend, 2011) based on a study undertaken between 2005 and 2010 that focused on improving educational engagement and outcomes for children and young people in care.¹ The thesis presents findings from a sample of children in care before and after they made the transition from primary to high school as well as large-scale data about children's educational participation and performance. The case studies of children making the transition to high school ($n = 56$), together with individual and focus group interviews with adults in their lives ($n = 187$), provide a rich understanding of the complex issues involved in improving the educational engagement and achievement of children in care. Two of the research questions related to the transitions that children in care experience:

- How do the various transitions children may experience in care affect their education and how can these transitions best be supported?
- What are the experiences of children in care in their transition to high school and how can this transition best be supported?

Introduction

Normative and non-normative transitions are particularly sensitive periods, characterised by disruption, dislocation, disorientation and uncertainty (Kralik, Visentin, & Van Loon, 2006; Selder, 1989). The findings from this study suggest that numerous transitions over time, or at the same time, challenge the adaptive skills of many children in care, increasing their vulnerability. Yet, children are not passive participants in this process. Children bring to the process their own strategic actions, adaptation skills (Lam & Pollard, 2006), coping skills and personal strengths (Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008) that result in a reconstruction of their self-identity as they make the transition (Kralik et al., 2006).

¹ Children in care is used as shorthand for children and young people in out-of-home care.



How do the Various Transitions Children may Experience in Care Affect their Education and how can these Transitions Best be Supported?

This research found that the transitional points in the care system included in this study - entering care, placement change and restoration - all had a direct effect on children's education by detracting from their learning and school life. The majority of these transitions resulted in a school change. This was widely reported by adults and evident in the case studies. Adults argued that substantial adjustment was required on the part of children in this situation, as well as the challenge of coping with ongoing instability or uncertainty and the loss of important relationships.

The findings from this study suggest that multiple transitions over time or concurrently can be more difficult for children in care due to the cumulative effects of change across children's functioning and coping mechanisms, increasing their vulnerability. The case studies with children found that that multiple school transitions (attending more than 4 schools) was significantly associated with negative effects on academic and behavioural functioning. There was, however, less evidence of placement changes negatively affecting children's social, academic or behavioural functioning at school. Most placement changes, however, also required a school change, so the combination of these two factors, and the reasons behind the placement changes, potentially contribute to the decline in functioning at school. A further transition, going home to live with birth parent/s, was perceived by adults as having a negative effect on children's education. Apprehension that birth parents struggled to prioritise and meet the educational needs of their children and the detrimental effects of failed restoration attempts were prominent themes.

Importantly, a key issue that children highlighted was that not all transitions they underwent were negative; many offered them safety and a fresh start, and represented a better environment for them to live in and learn. Likewise, adults indicated that for some children, entry to care provided a genuine turning point in their lives, where many of the issues they faced while they were living with their birth parents diminished as their well-being improved. Many adults viewed transitions as an opportunity to access educational and other required interventions to support children.

In supporting transitions, children identified that having the reason for the change explained, together with their participation in decisions about placement, school change and schooling options, were important in facilitating their successful adjustment to their new circumstances. Another factor identified by children that supported them at this time was their own positive expectations of the new placement. The key person they identified to support them through these, and other care transitions, was their caseworker. More broadly, adults also recognised the need for all adults to pro-actively support children with the grief, loss and discontinuity they experienced as they undergo non-normative transitions.



What are the Experiences of Children in Care in their Transition to High School and how can this Transition Best be Supported?

This study found that for most of the children their overall experiences of the transition to high school were positive. They reported that high school offered them a number of benefits including: new friends, broader learning opportunities, greater responsibility and independence. Many of the challenges were normative, faced by all children making the transition to high school. The significant challenge that children and adults identified was their capacity to adjust to the different environment of high school from the primary school setting. Demonstrably, leaving behind the security of primary school and significant relationships with principals, teachers and aides was difficult for some children.

The study found, however, that not all children successfully made this transition and adjusted to a more complex high school environment. A key finding from adults was that many children in care faced additional impediments in negotiating the transition due to the cumulative affects of instability and attachment difficulties, which may contribute to lowered school engagement. The case study findings also suggest that in addition to past instability, instability in placement and/or school during the high school transition period posed significant adjustment challenges for children. This suggests there may be some limits on children's capacity to successfully adjust when multiple transitions, normative and/or non-normative, are taking place. The context of the high school setting was also found by adults to be less well structured than the primary school in meeting children's social, emotional and academic needs. This was also reported by adults to have an effect on student engagement. For the third of the children in the interview group who reported low school engagement, peer and academic issues were problematic for them in the high school context. The findings from adults also supported that the academic difficulties many children in care experienced in primary school negatively impacted their transition to high school as children were unable to meet the increased scholastic demands, and that academic support was more difficult to secure in the high school setting to address difficulties.

The strategies highlighted by this study to support children in their transition to high school included selecting the best school for the child and collaborative planning by care and education stakeholders for a comprehensive and supportive orientation program. Adults and children argued that the selection of the best high school for individual children must take into account the child's preference, and a consideration of what the schools can offer to support the child as well as the social environment of the school. Children and adults also concurred that non-government schools should not be ruled out because of cost. Based on their own experience, adults promoted the value of a meeting between all stakeholders for all children in care, when the child was in Year 6, to plan for this transition. Both children and adults identified the helpfulness of making the transition with a group of friends or having a sibling or knowing older children at the high school. Furthermore, adults and children agreed on the benefits that a comprehensive orientation program that immerses children in the high school environment offers, building student familiarity and confidence, and allaying concerns.



Policy and Practice Implications

The following recommendations are directly taken from my thesis and concern how to better support children in their educational and out-of-home care transitions.

Recommendation – Returning Home Transition

That restoration planning takes children’s educational needs into account and considers the need for school stability where possible and the timing of school change if it is required. Support by Community Services is required to ensure that children are successfully enrolled and settled into a new school after restoration.

Recommendation – Supporting the Development of School Staff

That a training package be developed and implemented to support school staff in understanding the experiences, needs and behaviours of children in care, particularly with regard to trauma and attachment, and to acquaint school staff with the support available to them when they assist children in care.

Recommendation – Supporting Children in Care in Schools

That all schools with one or more students in care designate a senior staff member who is the key contact for all matters related to students in care.²

Recommendation - Supporting Children in Care in Schools

That all funding of teacher’s aides and other support services within New South Wales government schools for children and young people in care be solely the responsibility of the Department of Education and Training.

Recommendation - Supporting Children in Care in Schools

That where appropriate, children in care be assessed to see if they are suffering from complex trauma, and that complex trauma becomes a criterion for the receipt of Integration Funding Support within New South Wales government schools.

Recommendation – Preparing for the Transition to High School

That for each child in care, a meeting be held in Year 6 between all relevant care and education stakeholders, including the child, to plan for the child’s successful transition to high school.

² The enrolment forms now require that school be made aware than a child is in out-of-home care.



Recommendation - Preparing for the Transition to High School

That 'catch up' or remedial education programs be made available to children once their need for them has been identified. These programs would be available within, and funded by, the education system. A significant focus on 'academic high school readiness' in the year before children's transition to high school, with extra programs and supports to achieve this readiness, is important.

Recommendation - Supporting Young People in Care to Transition to Further Education

That young people in Year 10 who are interested in going on to university be provided with an education mentor within the school who supports the young person in subject selection, choice of university, university applications and ensuring the student is given the opportunity to attend information evenings and open days. This education mentor could also advocate for and facilitate the young person's access to education support within the school system.

Recommendation - Supporting Young People in Care to Transition to Further Education and Training

That the individual educational planning meetings held in Years 10 to 12 include the school careers guidance counsellor to support the career aspirations of young people in care.

Recommendation - Supporting the Transitions of Young People in Care

That no young person be required to change school in the final years of schooling - Years 11 and 12 - due to placement change, unless at the young person's request.

Recommendation - Supporting the Transitions of Young People in Care

That any young person due to be discharged from care in their final two years of schooling be supported to remain in their placement, through continued carer allowance and case planning.

Recommendation - Supporting the Transitions of Young People in Care

That before a young person in care leaves school prior to the completion of the Higher School Certificate, a meeting be conducted between the child, their carer, the school and the caseworker. When a child or young person is excluded from school, the school must make contact with the caseworker to discuss further educational options for the child or young person.

Recommendation - Supporting the Transitions of Young People in Care

That the state education system reviews their protocols for suspension and expulsion for children in care.



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