**Education for real: Guidance and support for care leavers in education**
**A summary of research findings**

*They tell you at school that it doesn't matter if you don't do well in your exams, and that you can always do them again another time. But when I left school I found they were wrong, and now I am having to study and work, and bring up my daughter at the same time and it's hard. They should tell you the truth: if you don't get your exams when you're at school you're nowhere.* Care Leaver

The need to educate care leavers is one of the highest priorities that local authorities have for supporting looked after children. Education is the most effective long-term solution for tackling problems of social exclusion. It promotes independence of mind and understanding of the value of social responsibility. Education develops self-esteem by building social relations with peers and with elders and by delivering qualifications which can be converted into personal and financial rewards. Those without education are at a personal and an institutional disadvantage.

The Children (Leaving Care) Act of 2001 recognises the low levels of academic achievement demonstrated by care leavers to date. It states that local authorities have a statutory duty to support and monitor care leavers into further and higher education (FE and HE), training and employment from age 16-21 (24 if in full time education). Much of this support and guidance is to be provided by the Connexions service, a 'one stop shop' for guidance, advice and support in making decisions about life, education and career. The intention is for education, training, employment, social services and local authorities to work together in supporting care leavers. However, care leavers present a number of emotional and educational problems which can mitigate against them being successful in post-compulsory education. They require particular support and guidance from teachers, carers and social workers at this stage of their development.

Many care leavers experience a dysfunctional and disrupted education, leaving them with low expectations of their potential for educational achievement. Care leavers generally have few educational qualifications. 70% (n. 4800) of care leavers in 1999-2000 left care with no qualifications compared to 6% of all year 11 students nationally. Approximately one in a hundred care leavers go to university, compared with one in three school leavers in the general population. (DOH 2000 and Joint Council for General Qualifications http://www.jcgq.org.uk/) Results from previous statistical analyses of educational attainment in care leavers presents a similar picture (Broad 1994, DOH/SSI 1997, NCB 1992).

The educational attainment of care leavers is directly linked to their care experience. Those who have experienced stable and supportive care when aged 16-19 are far more likely to complete education and training courses, and demonstrate the rigorous personal organisation necessary for successful academic work.

**Widening Participation**

In 2001 the University of Southampton ran a fully residential 6-day Summer School for young people from inner city areas who might not normally go to university. The aim of the summer school was to give these young people a taster of university life and to let them see what is possible for them.

Following a pilot scheme in 2000, the University offered in 2001, additional places at the Summer School for care leavers to provide them with the same opportunities as other young people. The vast majority of the care leavers who attended had a wonderful time, the few

who did not enjoy the taster, soon realised that university was not for them – an equally important experience.

"i*t was a life changing experience"* leaving care worker

*"I felt I could walk along the road and hold my head up high"* care leaver

*"if it takes me until I'm 40, I'm going to get to university. I don't want to be just another statistic"* an unemployed single parent care leaver

*"Thank you for helping me. I feel so much more confident now"* e mail from a care leaver some three months later

All summer school students completed a questionnaire which examined their attitudes towards post-compulsory education (The Dolphin Measurement Tool). The University facilitators (undergraduate and postgraduate students in the University) were also asked to report on the progress of each young person in their team, and to indicate where they had developed key skills.

## Measurement Tools

Academic measurement tools are legion, and provide the background of American and English selective education (Sax 1997, APA 1995). The majority of tests of academic aptitude are built around assessment of numeracy, literacy and verbal reasoning skills, or focus on school curriculum areas and assume prior knowledge of the school curriculum. These tests are concerned with the validity of academic knowledge and results are measured against standardised statistical analysis of a body of previous results. Whilst useful in some contexts, these results favour those who have studied in educational systems which focus on abstract and theoretical knowledge. Such testing does do not allow for a representation of experience gathered outside the confines of the school curriculum (Gardner 1993).

There is a move against summative assessments of this kind and a recognition of the value of formative assessments in classroom learning (Torrance & Pryor 1998). Personal and social factors are a key determinant in an individual's academic achievement. It is difficult to be successful in education if a young person is at odds with themselves or the world. The Dolphin measurement tool recognises the value of experiential learning beyond the school curriculum in forming a young person's attitudes towards further and higher education.

## The Dolphin Measurement Tool

As a result of the pilot programme, and other work with looked after children and care leavers, it became apparent that many of these young people had the potential to be successful in FE and HE, but lacked some aspects of academic and social development as a result of their care experiences. The Dolphin measurement tool was designed to evaluate the aspirations and outlook of these young people towards further (FE) and higher (HE) with the intention of determining what kind of support they would require from education and social work professionals in order that they might be successful.

The measurement tool surveys and analyses attitudes to education, employment, physical and mental health, family and environment. It provides a diagnosis and profile of needs. This tool measures the opinions and aspirations of a sample of care leavers **and** all other young people aged 16-20 who attended the Summer School.

**Measuring beliefs and values**

The measurement tool comprises three parts: a questionnaire completed by the young people, evaluation of the young people's work during the summer school by the facilitators that worked with them, and observations of selected young people by the researchers. Facilitators supervised the young people, and worked along side them on the projects completed in each faculty – Science, Engineering, Art & Drama and Social Sciences & Law.

This summary report draws on comparative analysis of responses of subgroups in the sample and presents a rich resource of opinion and commentary from all the young people represented. Significant sub groups in the sample were gender, young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, and those without parents as next of kin.

The facilitators' reports focused on young people's attitudes and motivation to the work completed during the summer school, with particular reference to teamwork, independent work, their use of transferable skills and key skills, and the relationships they created during the week. It also looked at the progress a young person made during the course of the summer school.

The questionnaire is in seven sections, focusing on:

1.  *Views on education*, including review of working style and relationships with teachers and other students;
2.  *Aspirations and attitudes to life*, including commentary on career choices in the short medium and long term, and investigation of the young person's understanding of how they can achieve these goals;
3.  *Basic skills and life skills*, asking the young person to evaluate themselves as a worker and their reactions to real-life situations of stress and crisis;
4.  *Identity and the community* which focuses on the young person's self-image in the context of the world around them including investigation of their worries, views on nationality and ethnicity, crisis, and self-knowledge;
5.  *Family, friends and the community*, asking students to comment on the people they have lived with and the influences these people have had on them and on future relationships;
6.  *Income and housing*, in order to identify the young person's awareness of their financial needs, and their perceptions of how to manage money; and
7.  *Physical and mental health* in order to identify young persons' perceptions of the relevance of good physical and mental health to success in life.

**Analysis of Data**

Statistical analysis of qualitative data was undertaken by two members of the Department of Social Statistics at the University. They mainly used frequency tables, bar charts and cross tabulations. Histograms were obtained for all the variables in the different datasets that were adequate for statistical analysis. The Chi-square test was used for correlation between datasets such as gender, age, nationality and next of kin. The analysts were given a free hand to carry out their work as the researchers did not wish to influence the outcomes in any way. Appendix A presents a summary of the data analysis.

Analysis of qualitative data is still in progress, but early results indicate that these findings correspond with the initial statistical analysis.

**Summary of report findings**

The Dolphin Measurement tool indicates that care leavers need support and guidance in raising their aspirations for education, in learning to recognise their successes in education, and in changing their attitudes and behaviour towards education. They require a flexible curriculum, a new environment for learning which recognises their needs and practical and pastoral support in order that they may be successful. The transfer from compulsory education into further education normally coincides with leaving the care environment. The young person must cope with the logistics of independent living, in addition to the demands of a training or education programme. It is precisely at this point in their training and educational career when a care leaver needs specific and focused support from education and care professionals to enable them to develop the self determination and self organisation required to be successful in education.

Observations of the summer school students and facilitators' reports indicated that almost all students improved in self esteem and confidence throughout the week, and almost all students developed their key skills. This suggests that active intervention with all young people, including care leavers is effective when combined with a learning programme they find challenging and interesting.

**Raising aspirations:** Many care leavers demonstrate low self esteem in their behaviour and attitudes to their physical and mental health. It is evident that the low self esteem of care leavers influences their behaviour in school and college. The high incidence of truancy and low academic achievement of care leavers and looked after children in education may be, in part, due to lack of self belief and self worth. Some of these young people appear to feel that they can never be successful as they cannot shake off the difficulties they have experienced in their past. As one lecturer at the Summer School noted:

*"they (care leavers) seem to bring with them a lot of baggage about being a care leaver. It is almost as though they are used to being treated differently from other young people so expect it, which is a pity"* university lecturer

**Recognising success:** Care leavers succeed in areas of education where they can see evidence of their success. Opportunities for the young person to be successful in the early stages of their chosen educational programme are important. They may need support in learning to be successful in personal and social aspects such as good attendance and active participation in group activities as well as in academic work. Feedback from other care leavers in education may be useful to the young person in providing an opportunity to discuss common challenges and to identify strategies for dealing with these matters.

**Changing behaviour and attitudes:** If a young person has experienced years of disaffection and disruption, then all care and education professionals must work to alter the behaviours that this will have engendered in the young person. Interviews with care leavers indicates that many have developed an antipathy towards education, even when they express a desire to improve their life chances through further study. In order that the young person can begin to take responsibility for their own learning, they must develop strategies for self-organisation and independent management of time and resources. They may need help to understand that long term goals such as academic qualifications take time to achieve.

**Flexibility in the curriculum:** The care leaver must be made aware of the possibilities that are open to them in the FE and HE curriculum, and there should be close liaison between schools, colleges, the Connexions service and social workers to ensure accurate and helpful advice is available. A number of education pathways are available to students in the current framework, which enables students to combine academic and vocational qualifications with employment. The National Framework for Qualifications (http://www.qca.org.uk/nq/framework/)

recognises the need to provide entry routes into levels 2, 3 and 4 for students without traditional qualifications and provides stand-alone qualifications in key skills and mathematics for such students. This may be a more attractive prospect for a care leaver then being obliged to repeat examinations. Care professionals should be aware that the qualifications framework is undergoing review, and that new developments are being introduced annually.

*A new environment for learning:* A lack of continuity in care and schooling and consequent lack of continuity in care providers and teachers can engender distrust between the young person and adults who are in authority. If a care leaver has undeveloped communication skills they may find it difficult to express their feelings with others, particularly teachers and tutors. Young people in this group need time to time to build relationships with familiar adults who they trust to advocate for their needs in education.

Care leavers need a learning environment that they find amenable. In interview, many of these young people reported negative experiences at school, often related to specific difficulties with teachers or other pupils. The atmosphere and ethos of an FE college with a range of students of different ages and backgrounds may well be more appropriate for the care leaver than a school.

*Practical support:* The young people must be supported in coping with the practical logistics of studying. Financial and emotional difficulties are often more obstructive than educational problems for care leavers. The Action on Aftercare Consortium (AAC 1995:15) comments that the Children's Act of 1989 places a duty on the local authority to promote the welfare of care leavers with support in cash and kind. In interview, many of these young people reported that they are often obliged to manage on a combination of social security benefits, one-off payments and wages from part time jobs. This presents considerable logistical and financial difficulties for the young person who wishes to remain in or return to education although the Leaving Care Act should provide finance for many young people in the future. However, in addition to financial support and they will also require the means to be able to work properly such as study facilities, a computer, a desk and stationery. They may also require help in finding child care or specialised health and disability care.

Stability in the care leaver's home environment is essential if they are to be successful in education. Wherever possible the young person should be included in an after-care education programme which provides supportive home environments at weekends and during vacation, mirroring the home support accessible to other students. These young people need the support of adults who provide a positive role model of the financial and social advantages that education can bring, and who are willing to support them through the challenges of undertaking a long term education programme.

*Pastoral support:* All young people experience frustrations and disappointments during their academic career, and all require pastoral support of family, friends and teachers. It is essential that the care leaver has a readily available network of carers and professionals in easy contact when such times occur. Regular proactive monitoring and review of a care leaver's progress in education is essential and all the education and care professionals concerned must maintain close and regular contact with one other.

The higher than average incidence of special educational needs among care leavers indicates that a programme of learning support should be devised at the start of a course. The review and monitoring process should focus on the progress of each young person set against these targets.

**The way forward**

It is essential to engender positive aspirations for education in the care leaver. This comes from positive self belief built on evidence of success. This research project has indicated that care leavers often have a negative self-image of themselves as learners, often related to real or perceived low attainment in earlier school experience. They need to be challenged to overcome these fears. Some young people are sceptical about changing their personal situation, especially if their experience is that change is destructive and damaging. The professional must challenge the young person's perceptions of schooling and education in order to puncture these views, and provide practical and pastoral support as the care leaver takes responsibility for shaping their future.

All young people need confidence, motivation and determination to succeed. For the care leaver who may be living alone, who may lack the support network of family and friends, and may be obliged to provide for themselves financially; the discipline needed to succeed seems immense. Research reiterates young people in this group require 'joined up' support from carers, social workers and teachers in order to create and maintain a supportive base from which to initiate their careers. A stable home base is essential, and it must be a stable base that the young person can control if they are to develop the personal skills and experience to become an independent adult. Success at home and in work and education is mutually reinforcing.

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**Web references**

The Connexions service                http://www.connexions.gov.uk
Joint Council for General Qualifications        http://www.jcgq.org.uk/
National Framework for Qualifications        http://www.qca.org.uk/nq/framework/

**APPENDIX A**

**Summary of initial outcomes from statistical analysis of the dolphin measurement tool completed by 139 students aged 16 - 20.**

1. Students who do not have parents as next of kin experience problems communicating with adults. Compared with students with parents as next of kin, students with other persons as next of kin agree **MORE** frequently that:
   - ?? some teachers ignore them
   - ?? they have difficulty telling the teacher that they do not understand
   - ?? more study will not help me to go further in my life

2. Students who do not have parents as next of kin experience difficulties working in a group and establishing new relationships with their peers. Compared with students with parents as next of kin, students with other persons as next of kin agree **MORE** frequently that:
   - ?? They are not good at working in a team
   - ?? They find it difficult to listen to instructions and information
   - ?? They need help to meet more people of the same age and background

3. Students with parents as next of kin have higher aspirations for education and are able to motivate themselves to attend school and college. These students reported **MORE** frequently that:
   - ?? They attended school, courses and training courses regularly
   - ?? They feel confident at school, college and/or training

4. Students who do not have parents as next of kin report a lower self esteem and express negative attitudes towards mental, physical and sexual health. Compared with students with parents as next of kin, students with other persons as next of kin agree **MORE** frequently that:
   - ?? They feel generally unconfident
   - ?? They feel depression can be cured by getting drunk
   - ?? Ecstasy does not damage your health

5. Analysis of gender difference indicates that females report they were more likely to attend school/college regularly than males; and males describe themselves as more confident at school or college than females. Males also stated that they were good with numbers and at speaking compared to females. Females also showed a much greater tendency to admit that they worry than males, and were more willing to share their worries in the questionnaire than males. Other perceived gender differences were in the areas of self esteem and body worth, health and success in sport.

6. British students disagree more frequently that school is the only place where you can be educated compared to non-British students.

7. People who think study **WILL NOT** take them further in their lives are much more likely to:
   - ?? Stay off school/college/training courses
   - ?? Say they are not getting a chance to say what they mean
   - ?? Say they do not have any real ambitions

8. Other correlations:
   - ✍✍ People who work best in teams are much more likely to say that they have somebody to help with their troubles
   - ✍✍ People who say that education is <u>very</u> important are more likely to say that they are not as clever as they would like to be and that they do not know what to say to new people
   - ✍✍ People that are confident in school are morel likely to say that they are not fat whereas people that are not confident are much more likely to feel 'too fat'
   - ✍✍ People who are not confident are much more likely to say that they do not like to admit that they do not understand