2016

Education and out-of-home care transitions

Michelle L. Townsend
University of Wollongong, mtownsen@uow.edu.au

Judy Cashmore
University of Sydney

Anne Graham
Southern Cross University

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Abstract

In Australia there are 43,400 children and young people inn out-of-home care, mostly due to parental incapacity, abuse and neglect. These children experience a number of significant changes in their lives in terms of who they live with, where they live, and for school-aged children, often changes in school. These changes are beyond the normative transitions that are common in the lives of children.

Keywords

transitions, care, out-of-home, education

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Education and Out-of-Home Care Transitions

Michelle L Townsend[1], Judy Cashmore[2], Anne Graham[2]

[1] School of Psychology, University of Wollongong
[2] Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University

Abstract

The current study examines the effect on the educational progress of several transitions that children in out-of-home care are likely to experience; these concern their entry to care, changes in placement and their possible return home. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with children ($n = 31$) were supplemented by case files for 56 children to generate rich insights into how these transition points were perceived to impact on their education. The research found that key transition times all had an effect on children's education, with the majority of these transitions resulting in a school change. Importantly, a key issue that emerged was that not all transitions were perceived as negative; many offered them safety and a fresh start, and constituted a better environment for them to live in and learn.

Keywords

Children, Young People, Out-of-Home Care, Education, Transition

Introduction

In Australia there are 43,400 children and young people in out-of-home care (care), mostly due to parental incapacity, abuse and neglect (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015). These children experience a number of significant changes in their lives in terms of who they live with, where they live, and for school-aged children, often changes in school. These changes are beyond the normative transitions that are common in the lives of children.

Transitions are a key aspect of the human condition. Normative transitions happen to the majority of people over the 'normal' course of their lives (Hareven & Masaoka, 1988). Also conceptualised as life stage transitions, they represent sensitive periods in human development (Lenz, 2001). These changes can be forced or chosen (Selder, 1989) and require a process of inner re-orientation and reconstruction of self-identity (Bridges, 2004; Kralik, Visentin, & Van Loon, 2006). Some transitions may be so complex and multi-dimensional that they intrude on every aspect of a person's life (Selder, 1989) and may heighten their vulnerabilities (Lenz, 2001; Meleis, Sawyer, Im, Hilfinger Messias, & Schumacher, 2000).

Many of the transitions experienced by children in care are non-normative or unexpected life events that create discontinuity in a child's life and are likely to require significant readjustment (Smith, 1999). For children in care transitions may trigger further change in their lives and result in less contact and interaction with the key people in their lives parents, siblings, extended family and friends. How individual children respond to these transitions is likely to be influenced by a number of factors including their development prior to the transition, the timing of the transition, their experience of the transition, and the context in which the transition occurs (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). How children cope with stress and manage the challenges in their lives is very likely to affect their attitudes and confidence in dealing effectively with new life challenges and transitions (National Crime Prevention, 1999; Rutter, 1999). The personal and community support children experience can also assist or make the transition process more difficult (Meleis et al., 2000).

Care and Education Transitions for Children in Care

Educational transitions that result in change of school, pose challenges for all students. Transitioning to a new school is stressful for students regardless of their age and requires a period of adjustment (McGee, Ward, Gibbons, & Harlow, 2003). West, Sweeting and Young (2010) argue that for some student the there is a significant long-term effect on student well-being and learning. Students with a poorer sense of belonging and well-being are at increased risk of poorer adjustment to the new school (Hanewald, 2013). When education transitions occur concurrently with other transitions i.e. puberty, moving home, family disruptions, there is a greater likelihood of negative outcomes (Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987). For children in care, they often undertake education transitions with additional burdens related to early adversity that are likely to pose additional challenges for them to adapt to. The specific stressors related to being in care, as well as the long-term effects of trauma and maltreatment increase the probability that they will experience difficulties (Hines, Wyatt, & Merdinger, 2005; Stone, 2007).

Transitions are a critical issue for children in care. Three key issues surrounding transitions for children in care have been identified in the literature. First, transitions are part of every

child's care experience (McIntosh, 1999); second, the effects of significant transitions, or repeated transitions, create vulnerability and a sense of loss for children (McIntosh, 1999; Queensland Department of Child Safety, 2006), and third, most transitions are planned by adults, and children have little control over them (Queensland Department of Child Safety, 2006). Browning (2015) describes the traumatic discontinuities that children in long-term care can experience but also offers ways to better manage the changes. Which suggests that transitions are not always exclusively about increased risk for children in care. Transitions can be positive opportunities if children are supported in developing new skills (Lenz, 2001; Newman & Blackburn, 2002b) to adapt to the change in their lives.

For children in care, there are a number of normative and non-normative, educational and out-of-home care transitions. Normative educational transitions include: starting school, moving to high school, and leaving school. Students may also experience changes of school, grade repetition and moving between education facilities i.e. special education settings. The universal transitions in the care system include entry to, and leaving, care. In addition, children and young people may also move between placements and service providers, change caseworkers, or be restored home or adopted. The current study examines the following out-of-home care transitions for children: (1) entry to care, (2) placement change in care, and (3) being restored to their family home and their perceived effect on children's education and school stability.

The aim of this article therefore is to increase understanding of how children experience these three key care transitions and the impact it may have on their education. The implications for policy and practice that arise from these findings are also explored.

Method

Qualitative data were obtained from two sources: interviews with children in care at a key transition in their educational career, the transition from primary school to high school, and information from the children's Community Services case files about the timing of their entry to care, placement changes, and school-related changes.[1]

A total of 162 children in Year 6 across three NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) regions were identified as being in out-of-home care. Of this group of 162 children, 47 (29%) were excluded by FACS caseworkers, because they had moved to a different area or recently been restored to live with their family or because their placement was considered too fragile. The remaining 115 children and their carers were sent information packs that contained a cover letter, information sheet, sample questions from the interview protocol and the consent form. With an opt-in approach, the children who wished to participate in the study then advised the researcher via their carers of their willingness to take part in the study. The Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee approved the study methodology.

Of the eligible potential participants (*n*= 115), 32 (28%) declined participation, 46 (40%) did not respond, and 31 (27%) agreed to participate. Of the six remaining children, 2 experienced placement breakdowns and four withdrew after providing verbal consent. The

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[1] This article reports on data from a larger study, *Are We Making the Grade? The Education of Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care*, undertaken between 2005 and 2011.

case files of the 31 interviewed children, as well as a group of children excluded from the study (*n = 25),* were also reviewed. Of these 56 participants, 27 (48%) were female, 29 male (52%); 8 were Indigenous (14%). Ten children lived in the Sydney metropolitan area and 46 children in regional NSW.

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with the children 12 months apart over their transition to high school. The aim of the first interview, conducted while the child was in primary school (Year 6), was to explore children's views about their educational to their experiences, the effect of their care experiences on their education, and their expectations for their future education. The purpose of the second interview was to explore how they had managed the transition to high school and any changes in their attitudes to their education. The interview schedules were based on a review of the literature and a review of studies that similarly interviewed children in relation to their education (CREATE Foundation, 2004; Harker, Dobel-Ober, Berridge, & Sinclair, 2005).

The second set of data was FACS case files. The purpose of analysing these files was to understand each child's circumstances from the perspective of those making decisions about them since their first involvement with FACS. A case file template was developed and used to record data from the Key Information and Directory System and from their paper-based case files.

A mixed method approach was used to analyse the data. Data from the case files was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software utilising descriptive statistics. A grounded theory approach to data analysis was applied to the qualitative data utilising Charmaz's (2006) approach. Interviews were coded line by line into the NVIVO software program.

Results

The transitions documented in the case files of 56 children are summarised in Table 1 (until the end of their first year of high school), followed by an outline of the views of the 31 children in the interview sample.

Table 1: Transitions for Children in Care

Transition	Case study children (*n* = 56)
Entry to Care	• 24 (43%) first entered care before starting school • 32 (57%) commenced school before first entering care • 30 (54%) experienced more than one entry to care
Placement changes	• Across care entries, the average number of different placements experienced was 5.5 (SD = 3.9) • Only 3 children had experienced only one placement • For the most recent placement change, half changed school, half did not
Restoration	• 30 children (53.6%) experienced more than one entry • For half of this group (*n* = 15/30), a formal attempt at restoration was made at some point during their time in care • At time of study, only four of the 15 were still with their birth family
School change	• On average, children attended 2.4 primary schools (SD = 1.3) while in care • On average, children attended 1.2 high school (SD = 0.6) while in care • On average, children attended 4.6 (SD = 2.7) known schools before and during care

Children's Experiences of Out-of-home Care Transitions

The 31 children in the interview sample were not directly asked about their experiences of entering care because of ethical concerns about the potentially distressing nature of this question; a small number of children, however, volunteered that both their well-being and schooling was affected by this experience, for some positively, but for others, it was more difficult:

> Came into care in year two… I am pretty sure I had special education because I was falling behind in classes.

> When I wasn't in care I was bullying everyone, swearing at teachers. I don't do any of that stuff anymore.

The lengthy court process for some children entering care, indicated by their case files, is likely to have contributed to some uncertainty and instability for the children who did not know what the outcome might be, or whether they would return to their birth parents or remain in care. One child explained how he did not understand why he was in care:

> I really didn't understand. I was younger than I am now. I thought they had taken us away because they didn't like our Mum or something, so I got really angry and I started causing more trouble.

Placement stability is a key goal of the out-of-home care system, but the children in this study changed placements for a range of reasons including:
- The move from crisis or short-term placement to long-term placement;
- The move to a preferred placement i.e. kinship care from foster care; or
- Either the child or the carer wanting to withdraw from the relationship.

> Because the place I was living, they weren't good people and stuff. And here [at this placement] everything is good, so I will be good too.

Children changing placements reported the move often created feelings of anxiety and concern, particularly if they were moving to unknown carers. They indicated that they required time to become accustomed to the new environment and to trust their new caregiver:

> Just getting used to the change took a while. It took a while to get used to it and not be afraid.

Children reported that the reasons for the changes and the way they were handled influenced their ability to adjust. Quick changes were viewed as more unsettling. The 'double change' of home and school was presented as particularly problematic. Over a third of the children (n = 12) indicated that being involved in the decision about the new placement helped them to accept it and offered advice about how positive thinking assisted them through this time. Some children felt that the older they were, the more important it was for children to have more of a say in where they lived:

> About 6 [placements], this has been the longest. We came here because they asked us if we wanted to stay here.

Restoration to live with family is the preferred permanent placement according to the Children and Young People (Care and Protection) Act 1998 - if it can be safely achieved. Four children were restored home during the course of this research. All of these restorations required a change in high school as their new home was between 30 and 180 minutes from their existing school. For two of the children, there was difficulty enrolling at a new school, resulting in one child spending half a year away from school.

Children's Experiences of School Changes

Children in care change school for a number of reasons, including the transitions outlined above, as well as the result of decisions made by caseworkers, carers, schools and sometimes children. For the children in this study, these reasons included:

- Carers moving house;
- Change to a school preferred by the carer;
- Changing to a school to support a fresh start;
- Carers' inability to afford (or the unwillingness of relevant agency to pay) non-government school fees; and
- Children's academic performance or behaviour (includes move to a school for specific purposes or home schooling).

> *[Why did you have to change schools?]* Coming into care (think year 4) and (year 6) moved to a new carer.

> I don't think you should ever go or attempt to go to public schools. Because, yes it might be dearer to go to a Catholic school, but it's better, you get better educated than a public school.

> The year before I went from [X] school, to a special school where they helped me a lot.

The average number of all schools attended by children in this study was 4.6 (SD = 2.7) and the median was four schools. This includes both primary and high schools and it includes the known schools attended before and during care; for a few, it includes the schools attended after restoration. Moves into home schooling were also counted as a school change. Of the ten children who changed high schools after commencing high school, six moved once and four moved twice. Of the first high school moves, five were associated with changes of carer circumstances or preferences for the reasons outlined earlier and five were due to placement changes. The reasons for children attending two different high schools included expulsion, transition to a special-purpose school, entry to a Juvenile Justice detention centre, and one child being restored home.

Children's main concerns

The children's key concerns about changing schools related to leaving friends, fitting in, and making new friends. Many children reported feeling nervous, anxious and embarrassed about the prospect of changing schools. 'Will the other kids like me?' Will I make a fool of myself?' and 'Will I find some good friends?' were common concerns. The challenge most frequently highlighted by the children was leaving their friends. This sense of loss can last for years, with several children mentioning that they missed their friends from previous schools years earlier. The period leading up to the school change and the first few days following the change were particularly challenging, regardless of whether the child was younger or older:

> It was so scary. Especially the first couple of days.

It was scary, weird. I was really nervous.

Some children reported when they were younger, this anxiety related to change could manifest in fears about being separated from their carers when they are at the new school.

When she [carer] left [the school in the mornings], I was always crying and everything. The teachers didn't know what to do, well they did, they cared for me but I always cried when she left and everything. I think it was really hard for the teachers and everything.

Adapting to new school

The children described three factors that helped them to adapt to their new school: active involvement in the decision, honest reflection on the current situation and, most importantly, finding new friends. The children reported that as they grew older, they wanted to participate more in the decisions about what school they attended and where they lived. Children's ability to accept the new school was also affected by their own reflections on their current situation. There was a sense that while many children felt their present circumstances were not what they would ideally have liked, they accepted this and tried to make the best of the situation. As one child who moved with her carer to a home four hours away from their previous home stated:

At first I didn't like it, but I figure we weren't going to move back.

The most significant aspect of positive engagement with a new school was making new friends. Knowing other children in some capacity at the new school, whether through sports, church, extra-curricular activities, or having an older sibling attending that school, helped children to feel more comfortable and confident. As one child stated:

You have to kinda like, know some people that go to that school and then you will fit in better.

For many children, the overall experience of changing schools was positive. Children reported that while their experience of changing schools was very difficult at the time, once they settled into their new school, life had improved. Changing schools was perceived as an opportunity to gain nicer friends, better teachers, and a fresh start:

Well I think it [my education] has improved a bit because I have had help with it with foster care.

Changing schools and getting better at things and having help to do it.

Several children, however, reported that changing schools had a negative impact on their academic progress. The timing of school changes was identified as an important factor. For some, their placement change and/or school change was timed to occur in the Christmas school holidays, allowing them time to settle into their new home before starting school at the beginning of the school year. These children were able to say goodbye to their friends and teachers. Starting mid-term presented additional hurdles for children in adjusting to a new school:

This school teaches a bit different to [X school]… because they learn different things. As in maths, at [X school], they would teach one thing first and here they teach it at the end of the year.

Other children moved abruptly, sometimes spending time away from school before commencing at a new school:

> I was really behind on stuff, still am. I was at a Year 2 or 3 level in maths in year 5 or something. There was one time out of school…where you just went there for like a month or something with no school.

> In between when we changed [placements], we stopped school for a while, I don't know how long but it was pretty long.

Discussion

This study highlights the challenges for children that come with each transitional period, as well as the chance for constructive change and a reversal of poor trajectories (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). The findings suggest that the transition points in the care system included in this study - entering care, placement change and restoration – can add additional challenges for children's educational progress, with the majority of these transitions resulting in a school change. The children in this study experienced on average 5.5 placements and 4.6 school changes by the end of their first year of high school.

Three central themes emerged from children's perceptions of what is most important in adjusting to changes in their lives: firstly, that change can be beneficial for their well-being; secondly, that stability in relationships is important; thirdly, that children need the support of the adults around them to successfully negotiate changes.

Importantly, children highlighted that not all transitions were negative; many offered a better environment for them to live in and learn. Rather than emphasising the stability of home and school, children emphasised their need for continuity in their relationships, particularly with siblings and friends. Children said that transitions brought positive benefits if they moved into better environments and did not lose connections with the significant people in their lives, even if they no longer saw them on a daily basis.

Many children believed that being in care had had a positive influence on their education, offering them a fresh start, and increased opportunities and assistance beyond what they believed would have been available to them if they were with their birth families. Certainly there was support from a number of the children in this study that a school change could offer them a fresh start away from unsatisfactory environments, peer difficulties and former labelling. Schiller (1999) found that children who were struggling academically appeared to benefit from being enrolled in a different high school from their peers, suggesting that children might then be freed from their peers' low expectations and labels.

In supporting transitions, children indicated that some explanation of the reason for the change, together with their participation in decisions about placement, school change and schooling options, are important in helping them to adjust to their new circumstances. This is in line with other studies (Bessell, 2011). Another factor children identified as supporting them at this time was their own positive expectations of the new placement and school. As Newman and Blackburn (2002a) argued, approaching stressful change with optimism allows children to actively influence their environment and regulate their emotional responses.

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Regardless of how positively children in this study felt about school changes, it is uncertain whether this group of children will hold the same perspective on the cumulative effects of school changes once they reach adulthood. One Australian study found a number of young people aged over 15 felt the school changes they experienced in care were detrimental to their outcomes (Tilbury, Buys, & Creed, 2009). Other studies with care-leavers have reported their regrets at the lost educational opportunities, the low motivation that resulted from school changes, and the lack of support from adults for their education while they were in care (Allen, 2003; Chapman, Wall, & Barth, 2004; Jackson, 1987).

Data from all NSW students demonstrates that student mobility between schools affects participation in NAPLAN testing and mobility has a significant negative on students test results across Year 3 to Year 9 (Lu & Rickard, 2016). Absences from school have also been demonstrated to have a negative effect on academic performance and the effects of absence accumulate over time (Hancock, Shepherd, Lawrence, & Zubrick, 2013). For children and young people in care their experience of changing schools is likely to be more difficult than other students changing school due to the cumulative effects of multiple changes in all aspects of their social, emotional and educational functioning (Townsend, 2011). This change when combined with placement change can be particularly destabilising (Downey, 2007).

In summary, this study does not resolve the tension between children's need for stability and the numerous changes in environments experienced by many children in care. The findings do, however, offer an appreciation of what children want and need – stability in their *relationships* with children and adults who are important to them. Children emphasised that their transitional experiences can be supported by their participation in, and reflection on, the process. Each transition that children in care experience represents both a challenge and opportunity and the next section explores the implications of this.

Policy and Practice Implications

Increasingly, the out-of-home care and educational sectors recognise that transitions are significant events for children, and represent important points for intervention (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2006; Queensland Department of Child Safety, 2006). The key areas where policy and practice can support children in care is to help children to understand the need for the change, children's participation in the decision and planning for the transition, personalised support for children as they undergo the change and opportunities for reflection with the child following the transition. The coping skills of the individual child and the capacity of the adults around them to support them through these transitions are likely to be critical in how well children are able to adapt (Newman & Blackburn, 2002b). Research indicates that structured transitions may be of benefit in supporting children in care through the transition experience (Browning, 2015; Strolin-Goltzman, Woodhouse, Suter, & Werrbach, 2016).

In particular, consideration should be given to the need to reduce school mobility and student absences wherever possible and the timing of school changes if required (Lu & Rickard, 2016). The types of academic support that children may require are also important to assess and implement at this time. Children who need to change schools require adult attention to their social relationships with their peers, to support maintaining existing relationships, but also to assist in making new friendships.

Limitations

While this exploratory study offers valuable insights on children's perspectives about their transitions in care and in education, several limitations warrant comment. A number of researchers have noted the limitations of using case files (Heath, Colton, & Aldgate, 1994; Osborn & Delfabbro, 2006; Talpin, 2005) and educational information has been identified as often missing (Uniting Care Burnside, 2004; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004). For two children, only one volume of their case files could be located and in other files, key items of data were not recorded. Gate keeping by caseworkers prevented the involvement of a substantial proportion of children. The children who were excluded may therefore represent a more 'troubled' group of children in care (Gilbertson & Barber, 2002). Similarly, a further group of 84 children did not participate in the study as they or their carers declined involvement or did not respond to the information packs. The views of the 31 children who were interviewed may not reflect those of the children not interviewed.

Conclusion

Children in care experience a number of both normative and non-normative transitions in their lives. Frequently changes in their living arrangements bring with them changes in the schools they attend. Despite constituting significant periods of adjustments, children in care are not always supported through these periods. A more holistic cross-sectoral approach is required to reduce the negative impact of these transitions on children's academic and social progress, as well as their behaviour at school. Children's active involvement in the planning and decision making process is a key step to support them in adjusting to and benefitting from their new circumstances.

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