The educational outcomes of young people 4–5 years after leaving care
An Australian perspective

Judy Cashmore, Marina Paxman and Michelle Townsend focus on the educational and employment pathways and outcomes for young people after leaving care in Australia, based on a longitudinal study of young people ‘ageing’ out of care in New South Wales. Consistent with the findings of other research on the educational performance and attainment of children and young people in care, the young people leaving care in this study were less likely to have completed their secondary schooling than others their age in the general population. Four to five years after leaving care, they were much less likely than their peers to be in full-time work and/or education. Many had a history of part-time and casual work in poorly paid and low-skill jobs, and over half the young women had had children. Those who had completed Year 12, however, were more likely to be employed or studying, and to be faring well across a number of areas compared with those who did not complete Year 12. The more stable and secure they had been in care, the more years of schooling they completed, and the better they were faring 4–5 years after leaving care.

Introduction
A body of research and various enquiries in a number of countries have consistently painted a picture of poorer educational engagement and attainment for children and young people in care and young people in care compared with their same-age peers not in care. Children and young people in care generally perform more poorly at school and are more likely to be excluded from school and to leave school early without appropriate qualifications (Heath, Colton and Aldgate, 1994; Stein, 1994; Biehal et al, 1995; Jackson, 1994, 2001; CREATE Report Cards 2003, 2004; Smithgall et al, 2004). A number of factors related to their pre-care experiences (especially abuse and neglect) and family background, and their experiences in care and in school have been proposed to explain the differential. These factors include children’s early learning and educational difficulties, low expectations by their carers and teachers, a lack of support, and multiple changes of placement and school (Fanshel, Finch and Grundy, 1990; Jackson, 2001; Harker et al, 2003; Berridge, 2007). The relative influence of these factors is unclear but it does seem that children enter care with a disadvantage that is difficult to compensate for, especially if they have been abused or neglected (Heath, Colton and Aldgate, 1994; Stein, 1994; Smithgall et al, 2004; Berridge, 2007).

Australian research: what do we know?
Research studies in Australia have been limited in number and in design but the picture is quite similar to that from other countries. There are three main sources of data to date. The first comes from a small number of research studies that have focused exclusively on the education of children and young people in care (Cavanagh, 1995; de Lemos, 1997; Uniting Care Burnside, 2004) or that have collected some information on education as part of a broader study (Delfabbro, Barber and Cooper, 2001; Fernandez, 2006). Secondly, CREATE Foundation, the ‘consumer’ advocacy association for children and young people in care, (since 2001) produced annual Education Report Cards reporting on their surveys with children and young people in care (Cavanagh, 1995; de Lemos, 1997; Uniting Care Burnside, 2004) or that have collected some information on education as part of a broader study (Delfabbro, Barber and Cooper, 2001; Fernandez, 2006). Thirdly, several states have carried out some data matching on state government departmental data on educational outcomes for children and young people in care. There are currently no national data of any kind.

Several studies over the last ten years (Cavanagh, 1995; de Lemos, 1997; Kids in Care Education Committee Working
Group, 2003; Uniting Care Burnside, 2004) have outlined the difficulties facing many children and young people in care, which not only affect their academic performance but also their ability to participate in the school environment and engage with their peers. Like research in other Western countries, these studies have reported that children and young people in care perform below their peers in the general population in literacy and numeracy (Cavanagh, 1995; de Lemos, 1997), with between ten and 30 per cent repeating a grade at school (Community Services Commission, 2000; Child Guardian, 2006), and almost a third not in their usual school year for their age (CREATE Foundation, 2004a). They also have a higher incidence of learning and behavioural problems and intellectual disabilities (de Lemos, 1997) and were often rated by adults in their lives as below ‘normal, healthy age-appropriate expectations’ in their personal, social and emotional development (Cavanagh, 1995). Some estimates are that between a third, and up to two-thirds, of children and young people in out-of-home care have a disability or other health condition that is likely to affect their educational participation and progression (de Lemos, 1997; Tzioumi and Nathanson, 2005; CREATE Foundation, 2006a; Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell, 2006). However, out-of-home care has not always been associated with continued poor educational outcomes. A small-scale longitudinal study of 59 children in one non-government service in New South Wales has pointed to evidence of ‘emerging gains in academic and emotional and behavioural outcomes as they progressed in their care placements’ (Fernandez, 2006, p 151).

In the current study, the focus was on the educational experiences of young people leaving care and how these affected their longer-term outcomes. It is based on a four-wave longitudinal study of 47 young people leaving care in New South Wales, Australia. Four questions were addressed:

- How do these young care leavers compare with their age-mates in the general population in terms of educational attainment and plans?
- What factors predict those who have satisfactory educational experiences and complete their secondary schooling from those who do not?
- To what extent did young people ex-care think that school had helped them?
- To what extent were the outcomes for young people 4–5 years after they left care related to their completion of secondary schooling?

The young people

Forty-seven (47) young people aged 16 to 18 under a wardship order, and due to be discharged from care over a 12-month period (September 1992 to August 1993), agreed to participate in the study. All 47 (29 young women and 18 young men) were re-interviewed for the second interview (three months after leaving care) but two could not be contacted for the third (12 months after leaving care) and a further four were ‘lost’ before the fourth, 4–5 years after leaving care (n = 41). The overall re-contact rate across the four interviews was therefore 87 per cent (41/47).

One caveat on the findings based on this group of young people is that their experiences probably underestimate the difficulties facing the overall cohort of young people leaving care at this time. A further 44 young people also due to be discharged from wardship at the same time were not able to be interviewed because they could not be contacted before being discharged (22, 50%) or after they agreed to participate (13, 29.5%); nine young people (20.5%) refused to participate. An analysis of the

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1 At that time, there was no formal funding for care leavers and no after-care services, so support was restricted and discretionary. Since then, the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 has been enacted and includes specific provisions on leaving and after-care assistance for 15–25-year-olds, based on assessment of need, for education and training, accommodation and access to health services and legal advice.
departmental case files for all 91 young people leaving care in this cohort indicated that those who were interviewed were representative of the overall cohort in terms of age on entry to and on leaving care, and gender. However, the non-interview group had more placements in care (an average of 8.2 compared with 5.3), and a greater prevalence of behaviour problems, especially ‘running away’ or ‘going missing’, and more school suspensions than the interview group (54% compared with 38%). To the extent that mobility and behaviour problems predicted longer-term outcomes, their outcomes are likely to be worse than those of the interview group. In addition, young people’s participation in the study means that they also had some access to support that others might not have had. For ethical reasons, we provided young people who needed help with information about sources of assistance available to them.

The average age at which these young people entered care for the first time was 6.9 years (SD = 5.3); on average they were 8.5 years old (SD = 5.1) when they became ‘wards’ [under a ‘wardship’ order, now referred to as an order ‘placing a child under the parental responsibility of the Minister’ in the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998]. The most common reason they entered care was neglect (due to their parents’ or carers’ inability to cope) as a result of various combinations of poverty, mental illness, intellectual disability, and drug and alcohol dependency; over a third entered care as a result of abuse.

The most common type of placement they experienced was foster care, but nearly half had also been in relative care at some stage and nearly two-thirds had spent some time in residential care or a group home for a short period before or during wardship.

The interviews

The interviews were generally face to face and taped with the consent of the young person for later transcription. Most occurred in the young person’s home but some were carried out in a variety of locations that included parks, cafés, schools and departmental offices. A few were conducted by telephone because of the cost and very long distances involved, with a number of young people having moved interstate by the time of the fourth interview. Two young Aboriginal women were, by their choice, interviewed by an experienced Aboriginal woman interviewer. The young people were paid 20 dollars per interview for their time and in recognition of their valuable contribution.

The semi-structured interviews included qualitative and quantitative questions asking about the young people’s current and past living arrangements, their education and employment experience, contact with their birth family, availability of financial and emotional support, and their physical and emotional well-being.

Several summary measures were constructed to assess stability in care, ‘felt security’, social and emotional support and overall outcome. Stability in care was measured in two ways: as the number of placements in care, and ‘stability’ based on having spent at least 75 per cent of their time in care in one placement. Felt security was a simple additive scale based on a number of questions (see Cashmore and Paxman, 1996, 2006) about their sense of being loved and of belonging, and of having had their needs met while they were in care. Social and emotional support was based on their reports of who they could call on for support 4–5 years after leaving care. The final gauge of their overall outcome was a summary measure of how well they were faring 4–5 years after leaving care, comparable to McGloin and Spatz Widom’s (2001) ‘resilience’ measure and Pecora et al’s (2003) ‘success index’. This was calculated by giving each young person a score of 1 (‘successful’) or 0 (‘not successful’) for each of six domains of ‘adult functioning’, and adding these to give a total score ranging from 0 to 6. The domains (and the criteria for ‘success’) were: employment (employed or studying throughout or through most of the period after leaving care); stability of housing (never homeless); substance use (no self-reported problems with alcohol or drugs); mental health (no reported depression or suicide ideation); criminal behaviour (no
admissions/self-reports, no convictions); and relationships (not violent or trouble-some). Education (number of years of schooling or post-schooling education completed) was not included in the analyses reported here because it was used as a predictor of their overall outcome.

The educational attainment of young care leavers
Consistent with the findings of research in the UK, the US and Canada, young care leavers in this study were likely to leave school early and without obtaining any qualifications (Biehal et al., 1995; Jackson and Martin, 1998; Courtney, Terao and Bost, 2004). Twelve months after leaving care, when most were 18–19 years old, just over a third (35.6%) had completed Year 12, the final year of secondary schooling in Australia and the qualification required for entry to higher education. One in five (8/41) had not completed Year 10, the minimum qualification expected before the compulsory school leaving age of 15. By the time of the fourth interview, 4–5 years after leaving care, a quarter had no recognised qualifications, having left school without completing their Year 12 studies and done no further study. They were much less likely than their 20–24-year-old peers in the general population to have completed Year 12 (42% of care leavers compared with 80% of young people their age: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2003).

Four to five years after leaving care, three-quarters (30/41) had completed at least one course beyond school or were engaged in further study after leaving school. For most, however, these courses were quite short and limited in scope. For example, 24 young people had completed at least one course at a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institute but these were mostly short-term vocational courses (such as hospitality, computer and office skills) or training courses to meet the federal government income support requirements. Three (7.5%) were engaged in longer-term TAFE courses which provide recognised qualifications for more highly paid occupations (eg welding, forestry, wool classing). Three (7.5%) were studying at university but another young woman had applied to go to university the following year, and her employer was willing to pay her fees. Another wanted to go to university to prepare for human resources work but could not afford the university fees and associated costs. There were no significant differences between the young men and women, nor between those who entered care early or as adolescents, in the number of years of schooling or the number of post-secondary courses completed.

Not surprisingly, the likelihood that these young people were engaged in further studies was linked to their Year 12 completion. All except one who had completed Year 12 had gone on to further study. In contrast, only about half of those who had not completed Year 12 had done so. Young women who had not completed Year 12 were more likely than those who had to have children within one year, and 4–5 years of leaving care. Their interest in further education was not, however, linked to completing Year 12: just as many young people who had not completed Year 12 (82%, including some of the young women who were mothers) indicated they were interested in further study as those who had completed Year 12 (76%). Several indicated that they wanted to go to TAFE to complete Year 10 or Year 12 so that they could go on to further education. However, few who left school early had gained any further qualification beyond the limited short-term courses they were required to undertake to obtain their income support payments. A number who had started at least one course since leaving school or were studying at the time indicated that they had dropped out or were thinking of doing so, mainly because of a change in circumstances (eg becoming pregnant), losing interest in the course or not being able to afford the course materials or tools. Few (only six out of 41) were aware that they could receive support from the Department of Community Services to support them in their studies, four of whom had received financial support and help with fees or course materials.
Young people’s reflections on their time at school

Young people’s comments on why they left school early, and on what they thought could have been done at the time to support them to stay at school are instructive, and consistent with the themes and barriers outlined in other studies in Australia and in the UK (Stein, 1994; Biehal et al, 1995; Jackson, 2001). The main reasons they said they left school early were that they were trying to deal with other problems, and either not interested in school or unhappy and doing badly. For example:

I was having trouble at home and everything, and I just didn’t want to learn, and I just gave up basically.

I was just a mess with drugs and that. I didn’t have my head screwed on and you think you know everything. When you get out in the world, you realise you don’t have a clue.

I never excelled at school anyway because of all the stuff that happened to me whilst I was at that age – it disrupted my life – if I started Year 7 again and did it properly all over again, then I probably would have done really well but I just hated it – I just wasn’t academic.

Several were quite reflective about the difficulties they faced and how unwilling they had been to accept help at the time. For example:

I went to lots of schools – about ten – moved around a lot. I was good at art but that’s about all. I hated everyone and I used to blame everyone for my life. I hated all the teachers, especially the ones who tried to help me because they tried to do it too much. They used to let me get away with not doing my homework – when Dad first went to jail. I’d say ‘I haven’t done my homework and I don’t care.’ They’d say, ‘Well, we’ll let you off this time and the next time they’d say the same thing. Then eventually everything started to come down on me with my friends and everything. [Better if they had jumped back. There was actually no way for them to get out of it, which was the worse for them.]

While some ‘survived’ through being good at sport, others referred to specific problems at school such as being bullied or ‘picked on’, not being able to read or keep up with the work, particularly after a change of school or a return to school after a suspension:

It was quite hard because I was moving on all the time and I never got time to settle in. If I did settle in, it was time to go. I went to about seven schools all up and I always felt different but I became quite a star at high school because I was really good at sport.

I was being continually harassed by the teachers [Because you are Aboriginal?] Yeah, and because I got shit from other students and stuff – it was a really difficult time.

Last year wasn’t very good because of the teachers and their old-fashioned attitudes [concerning her pregnancy].

When I was in Year 7, I was kicked out, then when I went back I didn’t finish Year 7, didn’t do Year 8. I was put straight into Year 9 and I just couldn’t handle the work and I didn’t like being in an all boys’ school.

I couldn’t read and write and everyone just used to call me lazy.

Being bullied and being suspended or expelled were also major concerns for the children and young people in care aged 9–17 who were surveyed as part of the CREATE report cards on education in 2003, 2004 and 2006 (CREATE Foundation, 2003, 2004b, 2006b). About half of the 278 children and young people in the 2003 national survey identified bullying as ‘the thing they would most like to change about school’. A number indicated
that they thought the bullying was ‘because they were different’ and they ‘felt very hurt and angry that the school was not doing more to protect them from bullying’ (CREATE Foundation, 2003, p 46). In the 2004 and 2006 surveys, almost one in five (19%) reported that they were being bullied all or most of the time, and in 2006, 49.2 per cent said they had either been suspended or expelled from school (CREATE Foundation, 2006b). Similarly, in the UK, ‘looked after’ children were found to be ten times more likely than their peers to be suspended and nearly four times more likely to be bullied; for example, ‘six out of ten children and young people in care’ were bullied, compared with ‘one in six of all children and young people’ (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003). In the Chicago-based US study, adolescents in care were ‘more than twice as likely to be suspended, and nearly four times more likely to be expelled from school as their peers’ (Courtney, Terao and Bost, 2004).

Possible useful educational supports
When asked whether there was anything that could have helped them to stay at school, some young people commented on the failure of both their case workers and their teachers to understand their problems, listen to their views, and provide additional support and tutoring:

They could have at least tried to talk me into staying – let me look at it in another way. [Would you have listened?] Yes – if they said it the right way. They basically said, 'If you don't want to stay – go.' I was really happy in primary school – all my friends were there and I wanted to go on with them. But because it was in suburb X and I lived in suburb Y, they yanked me out mid-year – same curriculum but different subjects – and I had to catch up and get into it and that was difficult. In high school, I begged them to send me to A High School – most of my friends were going there and I know if I went there, I would have been happy and had one school – but no, they sent me to B High. I didn't go to school for about a year after Year 7.

Realise I couldn't read! I can read now but my writing is still shit-house. I was 14 before I'd even learned my alphabet... ABCs. How come they didn't pick up on it? [Were you good at covering it up?] Yeah, I tried my best. [At covering up?] Yeah.

The support I had at school was shocking – my high school years would have to have been one of the worst stages of my life. [Did your foster mum know this?] I tell her now about what the kids used to do at school and she has changed her whole perspective on that – she is getting involved in meetings at the public school so what happened to me won't happen to other kids.

I needed someone to stand beside me.

Their comments and their call for support are consistent with the literature concerning the critical role that a significant adult such as a carer, teacher, or relative can play in consistently supporting and encouraging educational success and preventing adolescents from dropping out of school (Jackson and Martin, 1998; Croninger and Lee, 2001; National Youth in Care Network, 2001; Martin and Jackson, 2002; Harker et al, 2003).

Factors associated with educational success
Consistent with research findings about the disruptive effects of instability in care on children’s socio-emotional adjustment and educational attainment (Fanshel, Finch and Grundy, 1990; Stein, 1994; Biehal et al, 1995; Jackson and Martin, 1998), the more placements these young people had while in care, the fewer years of schooling they had completed ($r = -0.55, n = 41, p < .0001$). Those who had not completed Year 10 had an average of 3.4 placements compared with an average of ten placements with a comparison of 3.4 placements for those who had completed Year 12. Similarly, young people who had spent at least 75 per cent of their time in care in one placement were significantly more likely to complete Year 12 than those without this stability (69% compared with 25%; $\chi^2$
= 12.7, 2 df, p = .002). More significant than stability or the number of placements in care, however, was the degree to which these young people felt loved and secure in care (r = .624, n = 40, p = .0001); the more loved and secure they had felt, the more years of schooling they had completed, and the more likely they were to have undertaken some post-school education. Those who had completed Year 12 also had more social support after leaving care.

While the number of years of schooling completed was not significantly correlated with the number of schools attended, those who had had behaviour problems, and those who had been excluded from school or been ‘missing or truant’ were less likely to have completed Year 12 than those who did not have these problems. The more school-related problems either reported by young people or recorded on their files, the fewer years of schooling they had completed (r = −.49, n = 40, p = .002). Similarly, the more problems they had had in care (including running away, criminal offending and abuse in care allegations), the fewer years of schooling they had completed (r = −.64, n = 40, p < .0001). Only one young person who had ‘gone missing’ at some stage from school and from care completed Year 12.

Beyond school: predicting longer-term outcomes

The importance of completing Year 12 is evident in the figures on these young people’s work activity in the 4–5 years after leaving care. Those who had completed Year 12 were more likely to be working or studying 4–5 years after leaving care, and in the intervening period, than those who had not (88% compared with 29%). This differential is also consistent with recent findings from several large-scale surveys of young people in Australia: those who had completed Year 12 were up to three times more likely to be employed in full-time work or education and training than those who failed to finish high school (Pawagi, 2002; Curtain, 2003). Increasingly, the successful transition from education to the workforce in Australia, as in other Western countries, depends on completing school and engaging in further education and training. The decline in the size of the youth labour market means that the positions available (in sales, hospitality and other service sector jobs) are often part-time, relatively poorly paid and generally not on a career track. Young people like those leaving care and leaving school early therefore have great difficulty making the transition into the workforce, blocked by their lack of educational qualifications (Curtain, 2003). Few of the young people leaving care had the networks or family connections that are often helpful to more advantaged young people in finding employment.

Beyond education and employment, the more years of schooling or education these young people had had, the better they were faring 4–5 years after leaving care. An overall positive outcome score (as defined earlier) was strongly correlated with the number of years of schooling or equivalent education these young people had completed (r = −.776, n = 40, p < .0001). The links between education and later outcomes are of course likely to be quite complex and educational attainment may be a proxy for other factors.
(behavioural problems, stability and security in care) which are also correlated with or predictive of more positive outcomes. For example, young people who completed 12 years of schooling were more likely to have been in stable placements and to have felt more secure in care. Stable placements and felt security were also strongly predictive of positive longer-term outcomes (Cashmore and Paxman, 2006). However, the association between the number of years of education and overall positive outcome was still highly significant ($r = -.59$, $n = 40$, $p < .0001$) after taking into account the number of placements and felt security.

**Education success stories**

The positive experiences and educational success of some young people in care highlight the importance of support for those who did stay at school and who went on to further education, and the association between educational success and later positive outcomes (Jackson and Martin, 1998; Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005). Several young people who were studying at university and in longer-term TAFE courses had a combination of positive factors in common that presumably contributed to their educational success and longer-term positive outcomes. These young people had entered care under the age of five, and had lived with the same families in long-term stable foster care where they felt they belonged. They had attended school regularly and had few changes of school. They had good support networks and each had found a sense of community – either in a church or cultural group. There were significant adults in their lives who offered consistent support and encouragement and acted as mentors and role models. Karina and Jim, however, both had particular barriers that they had to overcome – uncertain financial support for further education in Karina’s case and racism at school in Jim’s.

Karina lived with her foster family for 16 years and really liked it there, seeing them as her real family. Karina planned to go on to university when she was in Year 11 and chose to change schools and her living arrangements for Year 12. After her HSC, she was really worried about what she would do. She became very depressed because she didn’t know how she was going to be able to afford to pay the fees and study. Her foster parents certainly couldn’t afford to help her but the woman she lived with during Year 12 collected money from her friends and the church community to raise the deposit for her fees. A year after leaving care, she was enrolled in full-time business studies and lived on campus and was very happy there; she joined the drama society and worked part time in the college café. Four years after leaving care, she had moved to Sydney and was renting a flat with another student. She was still part of the church community which has provided her with an identity, a base and security.

Jim was brought up in a non-Aboriginal foster family but had close ties with both his foster family and his Aboriginal kinship group. He completed his HSC at a university-bridging course because he had a lot of problems with racism at school. He also completed a computer course and at the last interview was in the second year of a three-year journalism degree by correspondence. He is involved with Aboriginal school students, tutoring them and helping them to establish a cultural centre at their high school. His foster parents have always supported his decisions and welcomed him home after he moved out for a short time.

The experiences of Karina and Jim stand in stark contrast to those of a number of young people who had little stability in care, struggled with school work and found little to help them, were subjected to bullying, ‘acted out’ or ‘skipped school’ and left school early.

Jack had numerous placements after entering care when he was nine; he struggled to keep up with the academic side of school and then left in Year 10. He went back to complete Year 10.
Jack's experience indicates that the path to further education and training may be circuitous and may take time and support to negotiate.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings from this study and other research indicate the importance of placement stability and school continuity in providing a solid foundation for educational success (Martin and Jackson, 2002; CREATE Foundation, 2004b, 2006b). In the current study, young people who had been in stable placements and felt secure there, and had ongoing social and emotional support, were much more likely to complete their secondary schooling and to be faring better 4–5 years after leaving care than those whose experience in care was more unstable and less supportive. In addition, this study, like others, points to the importance of a significant adult in fostering educational success (Jackson and Martin, 1998; National Youth in Care Network, 2001; Martin and Jackson, 2002; Harker et al, 2003) and the opportunities for children and young people to engage in activities outside of the classroom to develop their talents and interests (Gilligan, 1999; Who Cares? Scotland, 2004).

Our understanding of what underpins and what impedes better educational outcomes for children in care is, however, still rather rudimentary (Stone, 2007). One possible way forward is to conduct longitudinal studies starting at the point of entry to care and focusing on the various transitions within the care and educational settings. Such studies allow children's pre-care backgrounds to be taken into account and could include school and engagement educational outcomes that go beyond school grade scores and retention (Heath et al, 1994; Berridge, 2007; Stone, 2007).

Knowing what facilitates and what impedes positive educational experience and longer-term outcomes for children in care is just the first step. Translating this understanding into policies and practices that make a difference to their educational outcomes requires the collaboration of the various stakeholders—carers, case-workers, teachers and principals, and policy-makers (Francis, 2000; Altshuler, 2003; Harker et al, 2004; CREATE Foundation, 2006b; Zetlin, Weinberg and Shea, 2006). Government policy is a useful starting point, providing the ‘leadership and framework’ for practice (CREATE Foundation, 2006b). In Australia, this is complicated by the division of powers and responsibilities for education and for child welfare across the eight state and territory governments and the Commonwealth, with more than 16 relevant pieces of legislation. A further difficulty is the lack of commitment in Australia to the concept of ‘corporate parenting’, the adoption of a whole of government approach, in meeting the needs of children in the care of the State. Although responsibility for the physical and psychological health, and the social development and education of children and young people in care should be one that is shared among the various departments, in Australia, the community service departments which hold the overall parental responsibility on behalf of the Minister generally end up shoulder-ing total responsibility.

All state and territory governments have, however, made some progress in developing agreements or protocols between the relevant education and community service departments. Some
states have implemented individual education plans to identify the actions, resources and people responsible for supporting and monitoring the educational progress and outcomes of children and young people in care (CREATE Foundation, 2006b). Not surprisingly, the three states which first matched data across departments to indicate the extent of the educational difficulties of children and young people in care (Queensland, South Australia and Victoria) have made more progress than the others (CREATE Foundation, 2006b).

Significantly, as in other countries, the national consumer organisation for children and young people in care has taken a lead in documenting the educational experiences and disadvantage in a series of reports since 2001 (National Youth in Care Network, 2003; CREATE Foundation, 2004b; Who Cares? Scotland, 2004). CREATE’s assessments of the performance of state and territory governments in promoting the educational participation of children and young people in care have been informed directly by the views and experiences of over a thousand such young people surveyed across Australia. Despite the positive report that many students in the 2006 Report Card indicated they were receiving support and assistance with their education, their participation in identifying, planning and reviewing their educational needs remains limited. As Hayden (2005) and others have highlighted, while having a plan can be very helpful, children and young people need to be involved in its development and there needs to be someone, a champion, who will take specific responsibility for the child or young person’s educational needs (Zetlin, Weinberg and Shea, 2006). Furthermore, the focus also needs to encompass the education and training needs of young people, like many of those in this study, who have left care without an adequate education and useful qualifications so limiting their choices and options and those of their children.

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