Spare time activities for young people in care
What can they contribute to educational progress?

Earlier articles by Robbie Gilligan have argued the case for the value of participation in spare time activities for young people in care, in terms of its potential to enhance their resilience (Gilligan, 1999, 2000). Here he focuses specifically on how such participation in spare time activities may contribute to positive educational progress for the young person in care. First, evidence is examined as to what, if any, impact such participation may have for the educational achievement of young people in general. Attention then narrows to the possible educational impact for more vulnerable young people, and for young people in care. Two issues are considered: (1) why and how participation may support educational progress for young people in care; and (2) what it may be useful for adults to do in terms of supporting and eliciting any positive educational effects of participation in activities.

Introduction
The approach taken in this article proceeds from a number of propositions:

• that educational attainment is linked to a young person’s motivation for education and engagement with school;

• that such motivation and engagement are linked to a complex array of factors in the young person, in the school environment, and in the relationship between these and the surrounding context;

• that motivation and engagement in the case of young people in care are also influenced by a range of additional factors, including issues that pre-date, or contributed to reasons for, admission to care;

• that given the often depressing evidence about educational progression and attainment among young people in care, it is important to pay attention to factors that may have a positive effect on educational outcomes and that may lie within the influence of the concerned adults in the young person’s life;

• that one such set of factors involves spare time activities, including activities in the areas of sport, arts and culture, care of animals, community service and work;

• that spare time activities are one of the means open to carers and other concerned adults in terms of influencing the educational progress and motivation of young people in care.

The review below examines some recent international (mainly US) evidence on the association between spare time activities and positive educational progress. It also looks at some of the means by which spare time activities may serve to influence educational progress positively. The heavy reliance on US material merely reflects the fact that most of the work on exploring this relationship seems to have been undertaken there. It cannot, of course, be assumed that evidence from one country or cultural context necessarily holds true elsewhere, but the insights offered by this material at least offer a starting point for considering the issues from this different vantage point.

The article also draws on a range of qualitative case material to illustrate how spare time activities may have an impact on young people’s education-related progress. These have been garnered by the author from a range of sources (carers, social workers, young people in care and others who have been participants at workshops, conference courses and other activities in which the author has been involved). In such instances, the nature of the source is indicated.

Research studies reporting on extracurricular activities and educational achievement
Broh (2002) analysed data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 in the US to explore possible...
relationships between participation in school-based extra-curricular activities and academic achievement. The author claims that this dataset was the most recent then available in the US and the most suitable for the purpose. Broh found particular academic gains and benefits accruing to students participating in ‘interscholastic sport’ (competitive sporting events including other schools) (involving 42% of boys and 21% of girls) and, to a lesser degree, to those students participating in music groups (15% of all students), or in within-school sport. Results for participation in other forms of activity tended to have academic effects ranging from limited, positive to negative. It should be noted, however, that the only form of activity that led to improved scores on reading tests was participation in a drama club. Broh argues that his findings suggest that the key ingredients of activities that are linked to academic achievement are ‘structure, adult supervision, and parental involvement’. He notes that ‘interscholastic sport’ may strengthen student (and parental) ties to the school and thereby have an impact on the student’s educational performance. The implication of these findings would seem to include the importance of carer involvement or interest in school-based extracurricular activities, and the possible impact of gender differences in participation in competitive sport.

Barber et al (2005) undertook a longitudinal study of the activity participation of 1,800 youth and young adults in Michigan, a study which involved eight separate waves of data collection over periods of time. From their findings, they argue that:

making diverse clubs and activities available to a wide range of students is important. At a time [adolescence] when identity formation is a central concern, the opportunity to embed one’s identity in multiple extracurricular contexts and to experience multiple competencies facilitates attachment to school and adjustment. (p 206)

In their multiple-wave New Zealand longitudinal study of child and youth development based in Dunedin, McGee et al (2000) found that the young people’s participation in clubs and groups was ‘significantly related to adolescent attachment to parent, friends and school/workplace, as well as self-perceived strength’.

Mahoney, Cairns and Farmer (2003) report on findings from an intensive longitudinal study in North Carolina, USA. They found that for both boys and girls ‘consistent participation in extracurricular activities across early and middle adolescence was positively linked to educational status at young adulthood’ and to growth in interpersonal competence, especially for those with poorer interpersonal competence at the outset.

Fredricks and Eccles (2006) report on a longitudinal study in Maryland (N = 1,480 in Wave 1 in seventh grade to N = 912 in Wave 5 one year after participants had completed high school). One of the principal findings was that ‘participation in both high school clubs and sports predicted academic adjustment [grades and educational expectations] at eleventh grade . . . [and ] educational status two years later’.

Darling (2005) studied an ethnically diverse sample of Californian young people’s participation in school-based extracurricular activities (N = 3,761). She found that those who participated were ‘more likely to perform better in school, have a more positive attitude to it, and believe that they will remain in school longer’. The study also identified an association between participation and stronger academic aspirations. The author observed that her study ‘like others [has] provided some evidence that participation may be particularly beneficial to higher risk adolescents’. She cautions that the effects on educational outcomes that can be attributed directly to participation may be ‘small’.

The findings from these six studies (one national and four regional in the US, and one regional in New Zealand) generally lend support to the claim that participation in extracurricular activities has a positive effect on educational engagement and attainment. But it is clear that the message has to be more complex and nuanced. Many factors come into play in
this process of how activities influence educational progress, including, it would seem, the nature of the activity, the quality and duration of the young person’s engagement, the quality of adult commitment in relation to the activity within the school or other setting, and the interest of the parent figure/carer. It should also be noted that the US studies focus heavily on extracurricular activities within schools.

The studies reviewed above relate to general populations of young people, not to samples of young people in care. A recent Irish study (Daly and Gilligan, 2005) provides some evidence on possible relationships between participation in activities and education for young people still in long-term foster care. In a national cohort study of all 13- to 14-year-old children in long-term foster care (N = 205) based on telephone interviews with carers, a response rate of 83 per cent for the relevant population was achieved. The researchers found a statistically significant (that is, not due to chance) relationship (of correlation rather than causation) between the young person experiencing ‘social support from friendships and participation in hobbies/activities’ and ‘positive educational and schooling experiences’ (p<0.05). (It should be noted that this is not proven to be a causal relationship in either direction.) The friendship/participation measure was based on a composite measure of the young person having ‘an established friendship network . . . at least one close peer friendship . . . [and involvement in] hobbies/activities outside the home’. This suggests that the US and New Zealand findings of how leisure/spare time activities may impact positively on educational progress may also have some relevance for young people in state care.

In addition to quantitative findings such as those reviewed to this point, it is also important to attend to qualitative evidence as to how different forms of spare time activity may have educational impact. The accounts tend to complement well some of the findings from the studies above, such as those in Broh (2002).

### A range of activities

#### Commitment to music

A young woman growing up in foster care was helped to keep up her interest in learning the flute by her foster carers, her school and her social worker over ten years. As she became a better musician, she needed more expensive instruments but the adults involved ensured that she secured them. Today this young woman is a university graduate and working as a qualified music teacher (source: workshop participant).

#### Sport: an example from skiing

Involvement or attainment in sport may influence positively a young person’s attachment to school or the project of learning. It may enhance the young person’s sense of competence not just in relation to the specific skills required by the techniques of the sport but also more generally.

A young girl of ten years of age in foster care had a reputation for being clumsy and under-performing in school. Nothing the foster carers did could persuade the school otherwise. The carers enjoyed skiing and decided that this would be a positive experience and distraction for the increasingly demoralised child. The young girl proved a natural at skiing. Her morale was transformed and when she returned to school she was a different person and was eventually recognised as such by her teachers. Success in skiing led the girl and her teachers to see her as competent (source: professional colleague).

#### Sport: an example from football

Laura Steckley (2005) writes about her experience as a residential child care worker in Scotland and describes the case
of Ewan, a boy in the residential school where she worked. She relates how Ewan’s interest in, and ability at, football was a ‘vital component’ in helping him to develop ‘a stronger sense of competency – not just on the football pitch but in other areas as well’. She argues persuasively that football offered a rare opportunity for at least some of the boys in this unit to experience ‘progressive achievement’, something very precious in lives which had seen little success or sustained involvement in anything. This point has clear implications in terms of the wider educational significance for a young person of such initial ‘progressive achievement’ in even the limited sphere of football.

Caring for pets
An isolated and depressed ten-year-old boy in care joined his new foster family. Inspired by his foster father’s hobby, he took up an interest in tropical fish. Soon this boy, who previously had no friends, was forming a tropical fish club in school, had tropical fish pen pals abroad and had secured summer work in the local pet shop because of his ‘know how’ (source: professional colleague). While there are no data regarding the impact on his educational attainment, based on the evidence presented here, it seems safe to assume that his involvement with the fish enhanced his social integration and general sense of competence and that this in turn at the very least positively affected his identification/engagement with the school community, an important precursor of educational progress.

Part-time work
While certain literature or commentary may regard work experience as problematic for young people of school age (distraction from study, premature exposure to risky opportunities due to additional income, etc – McKechnie et al, 1998), it is also the case that the workplace may offer opportunities for social and psychological gains to vulnerable young people. A French study has found that the workplace offered disadvantaged young people a way of enlarging their otherwise comparatively diminished social network (Bidart and Lavenu, 2005). In their study of foster care alumni (young adult care leavers) of the Casey Family Program in the US, Pecora et al (2006) found that having employment experience while still at school raised the odds of the young person in foster care completing high school (which is accepted as a good indicator of ‘future well-being and successful transition to adulthood’ for young people in foster care (p 46). Those young people in foster care with ‘intermittent employment experience’ were over twice (2.1 times) as likely to complete high school, compared to a young person who had no such experience. For those with ‘extensive employment experience’, the odds of completing high school were even higher: 4.3 times more likely than for a young person in foster care with no such work experience.

Dworsky (2005) examined the economic progress of care leavers (leaving care post 16 years of age and in the period 1992–98) in the state of Wisconsin in the US (N = 8,511). She reports that those who had experience of being employed prior to discharge fared better in terms of gaining employment and securing better earnings on leaving care. Experience in the world of work for the young person in care may thus deliver potential educational and economic benefits. But the gains may be wider still. This comment from an Australian care leaver serves to underline the social and psychological benefits that may flow from workplace experience for a young person who has grown up in care:

The [work] traineeship made me feel really happy. Before that, my spirits were really down about getting a job. Like it was like ‘I was no good’ and then something like this pops up and you’re in such a good mood. Makes you feel like you’re wanted. (Cashmore and Paxman, 1996, p 147)

Overall, one of the key features of structured spare time activity is that it may often bring the young person into positive contact with well-disposed adults who may go on to serve a mentoring role in the young person’s life, often assisting their progress on educational or workplace pathways.
The contribution of mentoring to educational progress
Mentoring by a committed adult may be an important support and influence in a young person’s participation in spare time activities. While formal mentoring programmes that match adolescents with specially recruited volunteers have become very fashionable in policy terms, it should also be acknowledged that mentoring relationships may also arise organically in the lives of young people. The value of such naturally occurring informal mentoring relationships for those in care has been argued in an earlier paper (Gilligan, 1999).

DuBois and Silverthorn (2005) studied the experience of having had a natural mentoring relationship at some point while growing up in a representative national sample of 18–26-year-olds in the US. Almost three in four respondents reported having had such an informal relationship; with 40 per cent of mentors being non-parental immediate or extended family members, and 26 per cent teachers or guidance counsellors. Other categories of mentors (roughly in five per cent or less of cases in each instance) were sports coaches, religious leaders, employers, co-workers, neighbours, friends’ parents, doctors or therapists, and others. Young people reporting a natural mentoring relationship were more likely to exhibit favourable outcomes in the area of education/work (i.e. completing high school, college attendance, working ten or more hours per week) and to have better psychological well-being and physical health. Importantly, the average length of relationship was nine years. Not only was longevity a feature of these relationships, but so also was daily proximity in many cases, as may be judged by the categories above. Of additional note is the researchers’ emphasis that natural mentoring is valuable for at-risk youth, but that it must also be seen as only one part of a multi-faceted approach to meeting need.

Considering mentoring in all its forms (formal or ‘natural’), Rhodes et al (2006) propose that mentors may contribute to the social and emotional, cognitive and identity development of the young person, and that the quality of the relationship may be influenced by factors such as the young person’s previous attachments, the level of sensitive ‘attunement’ to the young person achieved by the mentor in the relationship, and the duration of the relationship.

In a study of one of the best established formal mentoring schemes, Big Brother Big Sister in the US, Rhodes, Grossman and Resch (2000) found that the mentoring scheme had a direct positive effect, among other things, on ‘perceived scholastic competence’ (and through that on grades achieved) and school attendance; and indirectly on the value young people placed on school, through positively influencing the young person’s relationship with parents affected.

In the case of residential or foster care, it should be noted, of course, that mentoring may represent a significant proportion of the constituent elements of the relationship between carers and young people in their care. It also needs to be recognised that not all education happens in school, nor is it all stimulated by teachers. Carers in residential and foster care settings may use seemingly mundane opportunities presented by daily living to support and stimulate learning, as in the example below.

Mentoring of practical skills by carers
Carers may play an important part as mentors in the acquisition of practical skills by the young person. They may do this in part as work-related role models themselves or in supporting the young person in care to access such role models. A young American woman in care underlines the significance of her carer as a role model in assisting her progress in the arena of work:

I have someone to look up to and model myself after. . . Like he’s [the caring adult] training to be a computer technologist, and he can teach me what I need to do to be a computer technologist. He can teach me the skills. (quoted in Laursen and Birmingham, 2003).

Another key role for carers may be in relation to modelling and encouraging
interest and skill in reading. There is evidence that strong literacy skills may be protective in conditions of adversity. In their analysis of data from the UK National Child Development Study in Britain, Buchanan and Flouri (2001) found that high reading skills at eleven was one of the factors that may contribute to recovery from emotional and behavioural problems experienced at age seven.

The following example, this time from Britain, neatly illustrates how a carer may use spare time interests to build motivation to learn. It concerns a young boy, John, in a residential unit who loved nothing more than to spend time in the kitchen helping to bake cakes. He had interest and ability and also thrived in the one-to-one attention involved in his baking with the particular care worker. John was not a star at school and still struggled to read. But as he got more interested in baking and cooking he saw that his mentor used cookery books a lot and he soon wanted to be able to read the recipes so that he too could deliver successful results. With this stimulus, John quickly became a more motivated student and a more proficient reader. In this case, the apparently incidental interest in baking sparked by a warm relationship with a care worker helped to lay the groundwork for recovery in reading deficits, a step important in itself but which may also yield wider benefits (source: conference contributor).

Mentors who play an educational role may also emerge from other parts of the social network of the young person in care. A young man in a residential unit was inducted informally into the trade of French (fine) polishing of furniture by his grandfather, a retired French polisher, thanks to the loan of a shed by the head of unit in which the activity could take place. The boy earned money from occasional commissions to polish furniture for people in the orbit of the unit and eventually took up a career as a French polisher (source: professional colleague).

**Conclusion**

A key feature of spare time activities is that they may entail engagement with committed adults, who it is suggested may play their role most effectively when they ‘provide an appropriate balance of structure, challenge, enjoyment and support’ (Rhodes et al, 2006). There is evidence that such ‘connectedness to non-parental adults’ may offer adolescents the prospects of ‘better outcomes in terms of scholastic success, social-emotional well-being, connections to social capital, and risk-taking behaviour’ (Grossman and Bulle, 2006). In making these points, it is important to heed the cautionary note sounded by Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003), who warn against giving educationally vulnerable young people yet more schooling in out-of-school time. Spare time activities may be more likely to yield educational benefit with this group of young people precisely because they are different from schooling. Anxiety about levels of educational attainment should not lead us to ignore this critical issue.

In broad terms, the evidence reviewed is positive, while not euphoric, about the educational benefits of participation in spare time activities. While Broh’s (2002) findings about intensive involvement in sport might not be entirely unexpected, the findings about the positive educational effect of participation in music groups and the literacy-enhancing value of drama clubs are of special interest. On the other hand, while his study has a strong design and dataset, it should be borne in mind that the findings come from a single US study and await corroboration in that and other national and cultural contexts.

Overall, the evidence reviewed suggests that there are things that adults can do, as carers, parents, social workers, teachers and policy-makers, which can harness the potential benefits of spare time activities in relation to educational progress. It is important that they receive training and encouragement to do these things. These include:

- valuing opportunities for carers/parents to stimulate, support and affirm engagement by young people in spare time activities (Broh, 2002);
seeking to use shared engagement in leisure time interests as a basis for modelling and stimulating interest in more general learning (Laursen and Birmingham, 2003);

seeking to maintain continuity of activities across placements by, for example, alerting new carers to previous patterns and arrangements and ensuring that the new carers appreciate the developmental value and significance of such continuity (Fong, Schwab and Armour, 2006);

seeking to use leisure activities to link young people in care to peers with strong educational aspirations, or at least open up opportunities for mixing with such peers (Rhodes et al, 2006);

seeking to offer or nurture experiences through spare time activities that offer ‘supportive peer and adult relationships, youth empowerment, and expectations for positive behaviour’ (Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003);

where mentoring relationships emerge or are encouraged, seeking to ensure that they endure long enough to have value, for at least a year according to some US researchers (Grossman and Rhodes, 2002);

recognising the value of involvement in a range of activities, for various reasons including insuring against any negative experiences that may occur in any one activity (Fredricks and Eccles, 2006);

avoiding all participation in activities being linked to school in case the young person is forced to leave that school because of any placement change (Clarke, 1998);

seeking to open opportunities for work experience for young people in care, based on the findings of Pecora et al (2006) and Dworsky (2005).

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