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Original Research Article

Policy without enforcement or accountability: Educational disengagement among looked after and accommodated children in residential care

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Abstract

This study explores the educational experiences of young people in care who have been excluded from mainstream education and attend alternative education provision within a residential care setting. Despite extensive Scottish policy frameworks, including Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) and The Promise, educational outcomes for these young people remain significantly poorer than those of their peers. Existing literature highlights systemic barriers such as placement instability, exclusion, and limited educational advocacy. A qualitative ethnographic case study design was adopted, drawing on semi-structured interviews with seven participants aged 13–18, alongside practitioner observation in the researcher's role as a Residential Child Care Worker (RCCW). Data were analysed thematically using a grounded approach to identify key patterns in participant experiences. Findings indicate that young people often feel undervalued and unsupported within educational environments, despite expressing high aspirations. Consistent, trusting relationships with adults emerged as central to sustaining engagement, while placement

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disruption and low expectations from professionals were identified as significant barriers.

The study argues that educational inequalities experienced by this cohort are rooted in structural and cultural failings rather than individual deficits. It highlights the need for greater alignment between policy and practice and advocates for a relational, strengths-based approach to improve educational engagement and outcomes.

Introduction

Looked after children in Scotland continue to experience some of the poorest educational outcomes of any group of young people in Scotland. Despite more than two decades of policy reform, care-experienced children remain significantly less likely to achieve positive educational outcomes than their non-looked after peers, demonstrating lower levels of attainment, poorer attendance, higher exclusion rates and reduced progression into further and higher education (Leslie & Mohammed, 2015; Scottish Government, 2022). Although these disparities are widely recognised within policy and practice, substantial inequalities persist, particularly among young people living within residential care settings.

The educational difficulties experienced by this cohort cannot be understood separately from the wider history of residential childcare in Scotland. Historically, children who entered care frequently experienced educational disruption, social exclusion and low expectations regarding academic achievement (Gilligan, 2007). Successive inquiries into child welfare services identified systemic failures in communication, accountability and interagency working, culminating in the publication of It's Everyone's Job to Make Sure I'm Alright (Scottish Executive, 2002). This landmark review highlighted significant shortcomings in the support provided to vulnerable children and became a catalyst for subsequent reforms designed to improve outcomes for Scotland’s most disadvantaged young people.

One of the most significant developments arising from these concerns was the introduction of Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) in 2006, which sought to establish a coordinated, child - centred approach to service delivery across education, health and social work (Coles, 2016).

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GIRFEC was subsequently supported by the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and complemented by the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, which established a legal framework for identifying and providing additional support to children and young people to help them access education successfully. More recently, *The Promise* (Independent Care Review, 2020) outlined an ambitious vision for transforming Scotland's care system, placing relationships, stability, and children's rights at the centre of service delivery.

Despite these reforms, evidence suggests that the gap between policy ambition and educational reality remains substantial. The Morgan Review (2020) concluded that implementation of Additional Support for Learning legislation remained inconsistent across Scotland, while evaluations of *The Promise* indicate that many care-experienced young people continue to encounter barriers to educational participation and achievement (The Promise Scotland, 2020). National statistics continue to demonstrate significant attainment gaps between looked after children and their peers, suggesting that legislative and policy reforms have yet to translate into meaningful improvements for many young people (Scottish Government, 2022).

A substantial body of literature has sought to explain these persistent inequalities. Frequent changes in care arrangements have consistently been identified as a significant factor influencing educational outcomes. Multiple residential moves can disrupt schooling, sever relationships with teachers and peers, and delay access to educational support services (Connelly & Chakrabarti, 2008; Sebba et al. 2015). Young people living in residential care frequently experience complex histories involving abuse, neglect, trauma and disrupted attachments, all of which can affect educational engagement and attainment (Morrison & Shepherd, 2015). Research has also highlighted the detrimental impact of school exclusion, delayed school enrolment, and fragmented service provision on educational participation among care-experienced young people (Sebba et al., 2015).

The educational disadvantage faced by this cohort in Scotland is a historic and persistent issue, formally documented nearly three decades ago. In 1998, the Scottish Office commissioned a comprehensive review of research, policy and practice concerning the education of children looked after away from home. The review identified being looked after away from

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home as a significant educational hazard (Borland et al., 1998). This was followed by the landmark 2001 joint inspection report, *Learning with Care: The Education of Children Looked After Away from Home by Local Authorities*, which identified systemic deficiencies in educational provision, planning and attainment (HM Inspectors of Schools & Social Work Services Inspectorate, 2001). Despite successive policy developments, including the 2007 *Looked After Children and Young People: We Can and Must Do Better* report, the Scottish Attainment Challenge, and the commitments set out in *The Promise*, educational inequalities experienced by care-experienced children have remained persistent. This demonstrates how long-standing systemic barriers continue to resist reform.

Alongside these structural barriers, increasing attention has been given to the importance of relationships in promoting positive outcomes. Relationship - based practice has become a central feature of contemporary Scottish policy, particularly following the publication of *The Promise* (Independent Care Review, 2020). Positive relationships with carers, teachers and support staff are associated with increased resilience, improved wellbeing and greater educational engagement among care - experienced young people (Mannay et al., 2017). However, while supportive relationships are undoubtedly important, there remains limited evidence that relational approaches alone are sufficient to overcome entrenched educational disadvantages.

Within residential care settings, RCCW are frequently expected to support educational participation and advocate on behalf of young people. They often possess extensive knowledge of children's daily experiences and are uniquely positioned to observe the barriers that affect educational engagement (Brookes, 2018a). Yet the role of RCCWs within educational research remains surprisingly underdeveloped. Existing literature is predominantly authored by academics, policymakers, social workers and advocacy organisations. Residential staff are commonly included as research participants but rarely appear as researchers or authors in their own right.

This absence is particularly significant when considering the focus of existing studies. Although a considerable body of research examines the educational experiences of young people in care, most studies combine children living in a range of care arrangements, including those living at

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home under supervision requirements, foster care, kinship care, adoptive placements and residential care. Consequently, the specific experiences of young people living within residential care settings are often obscured within broader care experienced populations (Fowler, 2018; Berridge et al., 2012). During the literature review undertaken for this study, no Scottish research was identified that focused exclusively upon the educational experiences of young people living in residential care while also being authored by a practising RCCW. This represents a significant gap within the literature given that RCCWs are among the professionals most directly involved in supporting young people's educational engagement on a day-to-day basis (Mannay et al., 2017; Mercieca et al., 2021). This study stems from a RCCW's observation of a gap between legal mandates for young people's educational rights and everyday practice - specifically, that school enrolment was frequently delayed due to anticipated relocations. Rather than assuming this pattern applied universally across residential care, the researcher conducted qualitative interviews, observations, and document analysis to investigate how these legal commitments are implemented in practice.

The present study seeks to address this gap. Drawing upon qualitative interviews with seven young people aged between 13 and 18 living within residential care and attending alternative educational provision, the research explores how educational disengagement develops and how young people themselves understand the barriers affecting their participation in education. The study is further informed by the author's professional experience as a RCCW, providing a practitioner-researcher perspective that is largely absent from existing educational literature.

The article argues that educational disengagement among care-experienced youth is not simply the consequence of individual behaviour or personal circumstance but reflects broader systemic failures in the implementation of educational policy. While Scotland possesses an extensive legislative and policy framework designed to support vulnerable young people, responsibility for educational engagement frequently becomes diffused across agencies, resulting in limited accountability for attendance, progression and achievement. Furthermore, the paper contends that contemporary policy discussions may underestimate the importance of workforce capability, professional expertise and educational advocacy in improving outcomes for young people living in residential care. (Brookes, 2018b; National Care Forum, 2020).

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By combining the voices of young people with the insights of a practitioner-researcher working within residential childcare, this study provides a unique contribution to the literature. It offers one of the first examinations of educational disengagement focused exclusively upon Looked After and Accommodated Children in residential care undertaken from within the profession itself. It addresses an under-researched area by examining the experiences of this cohort rather than treating residential care as an undifferentiated part of the wider care-experienced population. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to ongoing debates surrounding educational inequality, policy implementation and the future of residential childcare practice in Scotland.

Methodology and results

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the educational experiences of this group of young people in Scottish residential care who, after being excluded from mainstream schools, attended alternative education. A qualitative approach was best suited to capture how these youth personally perceive and experience barriers to learning (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

The research was informed by an interpretivist perspective, recognising that educational experiences are socially constructed and shaped by individual circumstances, relationships and care histories. The study adopted a bounded case study approach (Gillham, 2000; Yin, 2009), focusing on a single residential care campus and associated alternative provision school in Scotland.

Participants and sampling

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who possessed direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Gray, 2022). Participants were required to meet two inclusion criteria: (a) they were accommodated in residential care and (b) they had experienced exclusion from mainstream education and were attending alternative provision.

Seven young people aged between 13 and 18 participated in the study. All participants were living within residential care at the time of data collection and had experienced significant disruption to their education. Their education had begun in mainstream provision before they moved into alternative provision following exclusion. Participants came from across the UK, predominantly Scotland, with some from England.

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Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee. The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants and relevant guardians where required, and all data were anonymised. Particular attention was given to minimising potential distress given participants' care experiences. Interviews focused on educational experiences and future aspirations rather than asking participants to revisit potentially distressing incidents associated with their exclusion.

Researcher positionality

A distinctive feature of this study is the dual role of the researcher as both investigator and practising RCCW. Existing research concerning care-experienced young people has largely been conducted by academics, policymakers, social workers, or advocacy organisations.

This professional role provided contextual understanding of the residential setting and the challenges affecting young people' s educational engagement. The dual role of practitioner and researcher required ongoing reflexivity to consider how professional knowledge, assumptions and relationships might influence data collection and interpretation. The analysis sought to keep participants' own accounts central.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, practitioner observation and document analysis. Interviews provided participants with the opportunity to discuss their educational experiences before arriving at their current residential placement and their experiences within the current setting, including their attitudes towards school, perceived barriers to attendance, educational support and future aspirations. Interviews lasted approximately twenty minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

To enhance contextual understanding and strengthen credibility, interview data were triangulated with practitioner observations and anonymised documentary sources, including educational records and care-planning documentation. This triangulated approach enabled the exploration of

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both individual experiences and wider systemic factors affecting educational participation (Flick, 2018).

Data analysis

Data were analysed using grounded theory-informed thematic analysis. Analysis proceeded through open, axial and selective coding to identify recurring patterns and relationships within the data (Flick, 2018). NVivo software was used to support data organisation and coding.

Themes were developed inductively from participant accounts and subsequently refined through comparison with practitioner observations and documentary evidence. This process enabled the identification of both individual and systemic influences on educational engagement.

Results

Analysis of the interview data identified four interconnected themes relating to educational disengagement among this cohort: (1) educational disruption through changes to living arrangements and school instability; (2) relationships as a protective factor; (3) low expectations and institutional disengagement; and (4) aspirations in the face of adversity. Themes were developed through grounded theory - informed analysis of semi - structured interviews and triangulated with practitioner observations and documentary evidence.

The findings support existing literature regarding the educational disadvantages experienced by care-experienced young people (Sebba et al., 2015). However, they also reveal a more fundamental concern. Participants consistently described educational engagement as a low priority within the systems responsible for their care. While education was frequently referenced within care planning and professional discourse, young people often perceived little practical accountability for ensuring attendance, progression or achievement.

Educational disruption through changes to living arrangements and school instability

The most consistent interview finding was the disruptive impact of changing living arrangements and school transitions. Participants described educational journeys marred by multiple school moves, interrupted learning, and repeatedly severed relationships with peers and teachers.

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One participant explained: 'I've been to six schools. Every time I moved house, I had to start again. New teachers, new kids. It just wasn't nice'.

Several participants attended between three and seven schools, with transitions typically driven by housing changes, exclusions, or delays in securing a suitable placement. While moving residential or care settings does not automatically dictate a school change, new accommodation often falls outside the current school's catchment area. This mismatch creates practical hurdles and placement delays, forcing young people to constantly adapt to unfamiliar environments while their learning is put on hold.

Crucially, the findings show that housing changes and school changes are distinct events; one does not always cause the other. However, when a residential move forces a school transition, young people lose vital support networks, experience learning gaps, and must adapt to entirely new routines.

These findings echo established research identifying educational disruption as a major challenge for children in care (Sebba et al., 2015). The present study reinforces the continuing relevance of this issue by illustrating how shifting living arrangements, placement uncertainty, and educational delays combine to undermine learning continuity**.**

Practitioner observations supported these accounts. Placement transitions were frequently accompanied by delays in transferring educational records, arranging funding, or securing educational placements. In some cases, young people experienced extended periods without meaningful educational provision despite education being identified as a priority within care planning processes.

Participants commonly described feeling as though they were repeatedly required to 'start again' creating a cycle of disruption that contributed to disengagement from education. These findings suggest that while policy frameworks emphasise continuity of care and education, implementation remains inconsistent in practice.

Relationships as a protective factor

In contrast to the instability described above, participants consistently identified trusted relationships as a key factor supporting educational engagement. Positive relationships with teachers, residential staff, and

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other supportive adults were frequently cited as reasons for attending school or re-engaging with learning.

One participant stated: ‘Here the teachers listen. That makes a big difference. In my old school, I got kicked out just for not talking’.

Participants often contrasted their experiences within alternative provision with previous mainstream educational placements. While previous schools were frequently described as punitive, participants characterised current educational staff as more understanding, approachable, and willing to listen.

These findings align with previous research emphasising the importance of relationship-based practice for care-experienced young people (Mannay et al., 2017; Mercieca et al., 2021). Consistent with trauma-informed approaches to education, participants appeared more willing to engage when they felt emotionally safe and respected (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017).

Practitioner observations reinforced this theme. Trusted adults frequently acted as stabilising influences during periods of emotional distress, helping young people remain within educational environments even when they were reluctant to participate fully.

However, the findings also suggest limitations to purely relational approaches. While positive relationships supported engagement, they did not eliminate the structural barriers created by house moves, educational disruption, or inconsistent access to provision. Relationships appeared necessary for educational engagement but not sufficient on their own to overcome systemic disadvantage with any relationship being severed by the next change in living arrangement. A trusted adult might encourage attendance and support a young person ' s aspirations but could not necessarily secure a school place or prevent a further disruption.

Low expectations and institutional disengagement

A third theme concerned participants ' experiences of low expectations within educational systems. Several young people described feeling underestimated, overlooked, or excluded from opportunities available to their peers.

One participant commented: ‘They gave me P5 work when I was in S2. I just stopped trying after that’.

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P5 refers to Primary 5 in the Scottish education system, typically for children aged approximately nine to ten. S2 refers to the second year of secondary school, typically ages twelve to thirteen. The participant was therefore describing being given work intended for pupils several years younger.

Others described being placed in lower ability groups, discouraged from pursuing qualifications, or excluded from opportunities to sit examinations. These experiences contributed to perceptions that educational institutions expected less from them because they were in care.

This finding reflects wider concerns regarding deficit-based perceptions of care-experienced young people within educational settings (Ainscow, 2005; Mannay et al., 2017). Participants frequently interpreted low expectations as evidence that professionals had already decided they were unlikely to succeed.

Documentary evidence provided further support for this theme. Educational planning documents often contained limited detail regarding future academic progression, examination pathways, or career planning. In several cases, aspirations and educational goals appeared to be less developed than would typically be expected for young people of a similar age.

Perhaps the most significant finding emerging from this theme was the perception that education itself was not consistently prioritised within residential care systems. Several participants questioned whether attendance or achievement were genuinely viewed as important by the adults responsible for their care.

One participant stated: ‘Nobody cares if I come to school or not’.

Another commented: ‘They're just there to stop us fighting or going missing. School is really not their thing’.

While these perceptions do not necessarily reflect the intentions of professionals, they are important because they shape young people's understanding of educational expectations. The findings suggest that participants frequently encountered systems in which educational participation was encouraged but rarely enforced, monitored, or prioritised to the same degree as other aspects of care.

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Aspirations in the face of adversity

Despite extensive educational disruption, participants demonstrated aspirations that challenged deficit-based assumptions about care-experienced young people.

Young people described ambitions that included professional careers, higher education, and international study opportunities. One participant explained: 'I want to go to NYU ... like Lady Gaga. But I don't know how I'd even do that'.

Another stated: 'I'm gonna be a paramedic. I've already done my CPR certificate'

These aspirations are consistent with research demonstrating that care - experienced young people often possess ambitions comparable to their peers despite facing significantly greater barriers to achievement (Connelly & Chakrabarti, 2008; Mercieca et al., 2021).

However, participants frequently struggled to identify clear pathways through which these ambitions might be realised. While aspirations were often encouraged verbally, structured educational planning and practical guidance appeared inconsistent. As a result, many participants described a gap between what they hoped to achieve and their confidence in being able to achieve it.

This aspiration-achievement gap emerged as one of the most striking findings of the study. Participants had not abandoned educational or career ambitions; rather, many lacked confidence that existing systems would provide the support necessary to translate those ambitions into reality.

Summary of findings

Collectively, the findings reveal a complex picture of educational disengagement among this cohort. Participants experienced significant disruption through changes to living arrangements, school transitions, exclusion, and fragmented support (Sebba et al., 2015). Positive relationships emerged as an important protective factor, supporting previous findings regarding the value of relational practice (Mannay et al., 2017).

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However, the study also identified a broader systemic concern. Participants frequently perceived educational engagement as insufficiently prioritised within care and education systems. Although policies, care plans, and professional discussions emphasised the importance of education, young people often experienced limited accountability for attendance, progression, or achievement. Consequently, educational disengagement appeared to be shaped not only by individual circumstances but also by structural conditions in which responsibility for education was widely shared while accountability remained unclear.

The findings therefore suggest that improving educational outcomes for this cohort requires more than relationship - based support alone. It also requires greater continuity, clearer accountability, and stronger educational advocacy within the systems responsible for their care.

Discussion

Educational disengagement as a systemic rather than individual problem

The findings of this study support existing research demonstrating that young people in care experience significant educational disadvantage compared with their peers (Connelly & Chakrabarti, 2008; Sebba et al., 2015). However, the present study extends this literature by suggesting that educational disengagement among young people living in residential care is frequently produced by systemic discontinuity rather than individual unwillingness to participate in education.

Participants rarely described themselves as rejecting education outright. Instead, they recounted educational journeys characterised by repeated changes to living arrangements, multiple school transitions, delayed educational provision, exclusion, and disruption to learning. These experiences contributed to a gradual erosion of trust in educational institutions and reduced confidence in the value of educational participation.

This finding challenges deficit-based interpretations that locate educational failure primarily within the young person. Consistent Sebba et al. (2015), the data suggest that educational disengagement can be a cumulative consequence of repeated systemic disruption. Participants frequently described feeling that they were required to repeatedly ‘start

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again', both socially and academically, following changes in living or educational arrangements. In practice, continuity of education often appeared secondary to managing transitions, despite policy commitments to educational stability.

A particularly significant finding concerned delays in accessing educational provision following changes to living arrangements. While educational support was commonly identified as a priority within care - planning documentation, participants described periods during which little or no meaningful education occurred. These findings support Morgan's (2020) concerns regarding inconsistent implementation of educational entitlements for vulnerable learners and suggest that statutory rights do not always translate into practical access.

The findings therefore indicate that educational disengagement should not be understood solely as an individual behavioural issue. Rather, it emerges within broader organisational and systemic contexts that repeatedly interrupt educational participation. This distinction is important because it shifts responsibility away from individual blame and towards the systems responsible for ensuring educational continuity.

These observations highlight a critical tension regarding the professional status and preparation of the residential childcare workforce. While the Independent Care Review (2020), in its report *The Promise*, advocates recruiting staff based on values rather than qualifications to prioritize compassion and relationships, these qualities must be matched by the skills required for the broader role. Values alone cannot fulfil these duties, raising questions about how values-based recruitment balances with skill assessment, professional qualifications, and CPD. If residential childcare is to be recognized as a skilled profession, workers need the competence, authority, and professional confidence to advocate effectively for education. Crucially, this requires appropriate professional recognition, remuneration, and clear accountability across the wider care and education systems.

Beyond relational practice: The limits of policy without accountability

A second key finding concerns the relationship between relational practice and educational engagement. Consistent with previous research, participants identified trusted relationships with teachers, residential staff,

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and other adults as important factors supporting educational participation (Mannay et al., 2017; Mercieca et al., 2021). Young people repeatedly described feeling more willing to attend school, engage in learning, and seek support when they believed adults genuinely cared about their wellbeing.

These findings provide support for the relationship-based principles underpinning contemporary Scottish policy frameworks, particularly GIRFEC and *The Promise* (Independent Care Review, 2020). Both frameworks emphasise the importance of stable, trusting relationships in improving outcomes for vulnerable children and young people.

However, the findings also suggest important limitations to purely relational approaches. While relationships frequently supported engagement, they were unable to overcome many of the structural barriers identified by participants. Trusted adults could provide encouragement, emotional support, and advocacy, but they could not eliminate delays in educational provision, secure school placements, resolve funding disputes, or ensure consistent attendance.

This distinction is significant. Much contemporary policy discourse assumes that strengthening relationships will naturally improve educational outcomes. The findings of this study suggest a more complex reality. Relationships appear necessary for engagement but are insufficient on their own to guarantee educational participation. In other words, relational practice can support young people once educational opportunities exist, but it cannot compensate for the absence of educational opportunities.

This finding raises important questions regarding implementation of *The Promise*. While the emphasis on relationships represents a welcome departure from more paternalistic approaches to care, there is a risk that structural inequalities become obscured when policy discussions focus primarily on relational practice. Educational rights require more than supportive relationships; they also require enforceable systems capable of delivering timely provision, continuity, and accountability.

The study therefore argues that educational inequality among care-experienced young people is not simply a relational issue but an organisational one. Without mechanisms that ensure educational

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entitlement is consistently delivered, the gap between policy aspiration and educational reality is likely to persist.

The missing educational advocate: Reconsidering the role of residential child care workers

Perhaps the most distinctive contribution of this study concerns the role of RCCWs within educational engagement. Although participants frequently identified residential staff as important sources of support, the findings suggest that RCCWs remain marginalised within educational planning and decision-making processes.

This is particularly noteworthy given their position within young people's lives. RCCW's often spend more direct time with care-experienced young people than any other professional group and possess detailed knowledge of their daily experiences, challenges, and aspirations. Yet participants' accounts, supported by practitioner observations, indicate that residential staff often possess limited authority to influence educational decisions or challenge educational disengagement - a systemic barrier also highlighted by Brookes (2018c) and the National Care Forum (2020).

A recurring theme was the absence of clear accountability when young people failed to attend school. Educational participation was frequently described as everyone's responsibility, yet responsibility often appeared diffuse and difficult to locate. RCCWs were expected to encourage attendance but lacked the authority to enforce it. Schools monitored attendance but frequently relied upon residential staff to secure engagement. Social workers held statutory responsibilities but were often removed from daily educational experiences. Consequently, accountability became fragmented across multiple agencies.

This finding represents a notable gap within existing literature. Much research concerning care-experienced young people focuses on educational attainment, wellbeing, or resilience (Berridge et al., 2012; Mannay et al., 2017). Comparatively little attention has been paid to identifying who is practically responsible for ensuring educational engagement among young people living in residential care.

To the author's knowledge, no Scottish study has previously focused exclusively upon the educational experiences of young people living in residential care while combining participant interviews with the perspective of a practising Residential Child Care Worker researcher. This

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practitioner-researcher position provides a unique insight into the operational realities of educational support within residential care settings.

The findings suggest that RCCWs represent an underutilised educational resource. Greater recognition of their role, alongside enhanced training in educational rights, advocacy, and planning, may strengthen educational support for young people in care. Equally important is the need to ensure that residential staff are formally included within educational decision-making processes rather than positioned as peripheral contributors.

Implications for policy and practice

Several implications emerge from the findings.

First, greater emphasis should be placed upon maintaining continuity of education while transferring care. Delays in educational provision appear to contribute significantly to disengagement and should be regarded as a safeguarding concern rather than an administrative inconvenience.

Second, educational participation should be subject to clearer accountability mechanisms. Current arrangements often distribute responsibility across multiple agencies without establishing who is ultimately accountable when educational provision breaks down. Clear arrangements are needed to identify who is responsible for acting when a young person does not attend school or is without meaningful educational provision.

Third, greater attention should be given to forms of disengagement that are not reflected within attendance statistics. Participants described experiences of being physically present within educational settings while remaining absent from meaningful learning. Recognition of these hidden absences may provide a more accurate understanding of educational participation among the care experienced.

Finally, the findings support the professionalisation of residential childcare practice. Enhanced educational advocacy training, stronger partnership working with schools, and greater recognition of RCCWs as educational stakeholders may improve outcomes for young people living in residential care. However, these responsibilities must be supported by appropriate professional preparation, continuing development, meaningful involvement in educational planning and effective collaboration with

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schools and other agencies. Practitioners also need clear responsibilities and effective processes for escalating concerns when educational provision is delayed or inadequate.

Conclusion and implications

This study uncovers the educational experiences of young people accommodated in residential care through the voices of young people themselves and the grounded lens of a practising RCCW researcher. While the findings support existing evidence regarding educational disadvantages, they critically expose the experiences of a specific cohort that remains underrepresented within educational research.

This study exposes the persistent educational barriers experienced by this cohort. Despite decades of policy development and a sustained commitment to improving outcomes, the findings reveal that educational disadvantage continues to be shaped by frequent changes in living arrangements, inconsistent educational support, low expectations, and fragmented implementation of policy. While Scotland has a comprehensive legislative and policy framework to protect and promote children's educational rights, the experiences of participants indicate that the challenge lies not in the absence of policy, but in its clear lines of accountability.

The findings reinforce previous research demonstrating that positive educational experiences are strongly influenced by stable relationships, high expectations and timely access to appropriate educational provision. Participants' accounts suggest that educational engagement is too often secondary to managing immediate placement or behavioural concerns, despite education representing one of the most significant protective factors in improving long-term life outcomes.

This study contributes to the growing body of research exploring the educational experiences of accommodated children by foregrounding the voices of young people living in residential care. Although the findings cannot be generalised beyond the participants involved, they provide valuable insight into how educational policy is experienced in practice and highlight the continuing gap between legislative ambition and everyday reality. As such, the study contributes to ongoing discussions surrounding educational inclusion, corporate parenting and the role of residential child care in promoting positive educational outcomes.

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A central conclusion of the study is that Scotland does not lack educational policy for care-experienced children. Legislative frameworks, including the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, GIRFEC, and The Promise, collectively establish a strong rights-based foundation for supporting vulnerable learners. The challenge identified by participants was not the absence of policy but the inconsistency of implementation. Educational entitlement was frequently dependent upon local practice, individual advocacy and organisational capacity, rather than being guaranteed through consistently implemented and accountable systems.

The study also highlights the pivotal role of RCCWs in supporting educational engagement. Residential practitioners are increasingly expected to advocate for young people's education, liaise effectively with schools, understand Additional Support for Learning legislation, fulfil their corporate parenting responsibilities, and promote educational aspiration. These increasingly complex responsibilities require knowledge, confidence and professional judgement. Consideration should therefore be given to strengthening the educational and professional preparation of the residential workforce to ensure practitioners are equipped to fulfil these responsibilities effectively. Educational advocacy should be recognised as a core professional competency rather than an additional aspect of residential childcare practice.

The findings raise important questions about accountability, the fulfilment of corporate parenting responsibilities, and the consistent implementation of children's educational rights. Unlike birth parents, who may face legal intervention when a child persistently fails to attend school, professionals acting as corporate parents are not always subject to equivalent scrutiny when delays in professional decision-making contribute to extended periods out of education. Educational responsibility may be shared across several agencies, but when provision is delayed or a young person remains without meaningful access to education, there must be clarity about who is responsible for resolving the situation. If the state is to act as an effective corporate parent, educational decisions should be afforded the same urgency, expectation and accountability that society rightly expects of birth parents.

Several priorities for future research have been highlighted by this study. Comparative studies examining educational experiences across residential

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care, foster care, and kinship care may help identify factors unique to different care environments. Longitudinal research following care-experienced young people beyond compulsory education would enhance understanding of how educational experiences influence later employment, training, and higher education outcomes. Further evaluation of approaches designed to improve educational engagement, including relationship-based interventions, advocacy models, and incentive-based programmes, would also contribute valuable evidence to inform policy and practice. Further work could explore young people' s trust in educational institutions, the effects of losing trusted relationships following changes of setting, and how responsibility for attendance and educational provision is understood and exercised across agencies.

To the author's knowledge, this is the first Scottish study focused exclusively on the educational experiences of this cohort living in residential care that combines participant interviews with the perspective of a practising RCCW researcher. In doing so, it contributes a distance perspective to debates surrounding educational inequality and care experience.

Ultimately, improving educational outcomes for this cohort requires more than progressive legislation or policy commitments. It requires consistent implementation, professional accountability, continuity of educational provision, and a residential workforce equipped to advocate for education as a fundamental right. The young people who participated in this study did not lack ability, ambition or potential; what they frequently lacked was a system capable of translating educational rights into consistent educational opportunities. Until educational participation is treated as a non-negotiable entitlement rather than an aspirational objective, the gap between policy ambition and educational reality is likely to remain.

The challenge for Scotland is therefore not to create new promises, but to ensure that the promises already made are delivered in practice. The value of policy lies not in its existence alone, but in its implementation and accountability. If Scotland is to fulfil its commitment to acting as an effective corporate parent, it must ensure that educational rights are not only protected in legislation but implemented consistently in practice.

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Deborah Lindsay completed this research while working as a Residential Child Care Worker in Scotland as part of the requirements for the award of a Master's degree at the University of Strathclyde. Her research focuses on the educational experiences of Looked After and Accommodated Children (LAAC) living in residential care, with particular interest in educational disengagement, educational inequality, and improving educational outcomes through evidence-informed policy and practice.

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