END OF PROJECT REPORT

Project Reference	SCF-20-1790
Project Title	Leaving a Pupil Referral Unit: Exploring the post-16 transitions and destinations of care experienced young people across Wales
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Host Institution	Cardiff University
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1-page: Main Messages

Young people who are removed from mainstream education during compulsory schooling are at increased risk of withdrawal or non-completion of post-16 education or training programmes. Care experienced young people are more likely to be overrepresented in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) - the most used form of alternative provision away from mainstream education. Yet there has been scarce attention to the experiences and perspectives of care experienced young people as they transition from PRUs to further education, employment or training (EET). This project examined the experiences of care experienced PRU pupils in Wales to understand more about their transitions to post-16 destinations. It also looked at the practices of staff who supported them during transitions. In addition, the project used anonymous routinely collected data to explore the relationship between being care experienced and attending a PRU in Wales. It did this by focusing on Year 11 (Y11) pupils between 2018/2019 and 2020/2021 and examined the likelihood of attending a PRU for both the care experienced and non-care experienced populations. Existing academic literature was also reviewed to understand what factors enable or create barriers to sustaining post-16 transitions in EET for care experienced PRU pupils. Key findings include:

- Of the total Y11 population in Wales during 2018/2019 and 2020/2021, care experienced young people were more likely to be attending a PRU (7.1%) compared with those who were not care experienced (0.9%).

- Late entry into the care system (aged 11+) increased the likelihood of attending a PRU.

- Care experienced PRU pupils can face multiple transitions simultaneously. This can result in a loss of supportive relationships with key adults.

- PRU pupils experienced positive relationships with staff. These relationships should be extended into post-16 destinations where possible.

- Post-16 transition planning should include a 'relational framework', which considers the facilitation and development of relational and social support for care experienced PRU pupils.

3-page: Executive Summary

Context

Young people who are removed from mainstream compulsory schooling and attend Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) - the most used form of alternative education provision, are more likely to drop out of education, employment or training aged 16. Young people with experience of the care system are over-represented in PRUs owing to a range of social, emotional and behavioral difficulties which are often related to their pre-care and in-care experiences. The social, emotional and behavioural challenges experienced by young people invariably result in school refusals, exclusion from school, or managed moves into PRUs. Once removed from mainstream school and placed in alternative provision, young people are at increased risk of poor mental health, loneliness, homelessness, criminal exploitation, and suicide as they move into adulthood.

Despite these increased risks, relatively little research has been conducted which specifically considers the educational experiences and transitions of care experienced young people who have been excluded or removed from mainstream school settings. No statistical evidence in Wales existed about the relationship between being care experienced and attending a PRU, leaving significant gaps in knowledge around this and questions unanswered. For example, to what extent are those with experience of care over-represented in PRUs, compared with those without experience of care? How do in-care characteristics of young people, such as the age on entry to care, affect their likelihood of attending a PRU? Answering these questions is important for developing a more sophisticated understanding of care experienced young people's educational experiences and outcomes, for those excluded from mainstream schooling.

Project summary

This project used existing academic literature, anonymous routinely collected data, and qualitative interviews, to understand: the relationship between school exclusion, PRU attendance and being care experienced; the factors which facilitate or create barriers to sustained placements in post-16 destinations, and the aspirations and eventual destinations that care experienced young people move into.

A review of existing literature was undertaken focusing on literature related to supporting care experienced PRU learners' transitions to post-16 destinations. It considered the key challenges that professionals face when supporting PRU pupils, and the experiences of the young people

themselves. Data was used from education and social care to identify whether care experienced young people in Wales are more likely to attend a PRU in Year 11, and which in-care factors might increase the likelihood of being excluded from mainstream school, such as age of entry into the care system, sex of a young person, and reasons for entering the care system. Interviews were also conducted with staff who support the post-16 transitions of PRU pupils, including teachers, transition officers from further education colleges, college staff, careers advisors and youth workers. Finally, a group of care experienced young people who attended three PRUs in Wales were also interviewed about their school and post-16 transition experiences.

Public and Patient Involvement

Care experienced young people were consulted in the design and development of the research and were recruited through the CASCADE Voices group. The group were consulted at the start of the project about the focus and design of the research, midway through the project about the qualitative findings and approaches for reconnecting with young participants, and twice at the end of the project, to consider further findings and the best approach for disseminating the findings. Input from CASCADE Voices helped to shape the project. For instance, the group suggested being mindful of how to re-engage with young participants in follow-up interviews appropriately, such as being led by what they wanted, reminding participants of the project purpose, and thinking carefully about where to meet. As a result of this feedback a clear strategy was used when attempting to reconnect. This helped to ensure that participants didn't feel pressured into taking part, but understood the positive contribution they could make. It also reduced the risk of stigmatising the young participants, by meeting in locations that the young people felt comfortable in.

Key Findings and Implications

The project's key findings are as follows. Each has implications for education and social work practice and policy:

- Of the total Y11 population in Wales between 2018/2019 and 2020/2021, care experienced young people were more likely to be attending a PRU (7.1%) compared with those not care experienced (0.9%).

- When other factors related to risk of school exclusion are controlled for, care experienced young people remain over-represented in the PRU population, suggesting that other factors must be considered.

- Late entry into the care system (aged 11+) increased the likelihood of attending a PRU. Providing good quality and early interventions in education would be beneficial for these young people.

- There were often prolonged periods of emotional and physical exclusion in mainstream school settings, before removal from school occurred.

- PRUs re-engaged pupils through positive relationships, supporting academic and social development once more. This provided a sense of belonging and emotional recognition, which helped to improve self-confidence and esteem.

- Multiple challenges can be experienced during post-16 transitions, such as leaving care and compulsory education simultaneously. This can result in a sudden loss of positive relationships.

- There is a lack of academic literature which considers post-16 transitions for care experienced PRU pupils.

- Where positive relationships exist between PRU staff and pupils, these should be extended into post-16 destinations.

- Consistent role models who provide positive emotional and practical support can help young people to stay in post-16 destinations.

- Post-16 transition planning should include a 'relational framework', which considers the facilitation and development of relational and social support for care experienced PRU pupils.

- Care experienced PRU pupils had many aspirations and realistic plans for their future lives. Having flexibility in the compulsory schooling system and extending the leaving age was viewed as something that would help some pupils with their post-16 transitions.