

Swedish summary national report (WP9)

1. The purpose of the study and the EU context (to be provided by editor)

2. The national policy context and brief outline of care and education systems

In Sweden, compulsory school begins at age 7 and continues until 16 years of age, with a preschool year before compulsory school begins. In the last 20 years the Swedish school system has been changed in important ways. The municipalities, not the government, have assumed responsibility for providing education. New grading systems, independent schools, a 3-year upper secondary school based on seventeen programmes, are major changes accomplished in the 1990s.

Leaving certificates are issued when the pupil finishes compulsory school. The following scale is used: pass (G), pass with distinction (VG) and pass with special distinction (MVG). Beyond this, upper secondary school is non-compulsory schooling for young people aged 16-20 and consists of 17 national programmes. The secondary school lasts three years and although not required by law, is in practice considered obligatory. Each programme comprises of eight core subjects, a number of programme-specific subjects, a special project and work-place training in the vocationally-oriented programmes. A programme lasts for 3 years and to obtain a leaving certificate the young person must have been awarded a grade for all courses and for the project work. Pupils who do not have passing grades in Swedish, mathematics and English are not qualified to apply for a national programme. These pupils are offered the opportunity to study at an individual programme. As a consequence, nearly all young people are included in the upper secondary school system. However, when looking at those born between 1972 and 1992, 18 percent did not complete upper secondary school

Children in care and their education

Out of home care within the child welfare system is an area of expansion with an increasing number of young people placed in care. In 2008, around 22 000 Swedish children and young people were placed in care at some point during the year. About two thirds were 13 years, or older (Socialstyrelsen, 2009). In recent decades, about 75% of all children and young people in out-of-home care have been placed in foster care. For young people over 18 years of age, the median time in care was over 4 years (Socialstyrelsen 2009). Although the law stipulates an age limit of 18 (or 21 in cases of mandatory care orders), young people often stay in care until they have completed their upper secondary school education. Thus, placements in foster/residential care are usually ended when young people reach the age of 19.

In Sweden, very little attention has been paid to the educational attainments of children and young people placed in out-of-home care. As with other countries, this has been overlooked in the child welfare system for decades. Vinnerljung (1998) questioned the lack of awareness of the importance of education for children and young people placed in care. There are no general systematised procedures for enhancing the educational attainments of children and young people

placed in care in the Swedish child welfare system.

In the SSA, chapter 6 and 7, the legislation states that the social welfare committee shall ensure that children and young people placed in care receive ‘appropriate education’. The guidance to the Act, further states:

‘The direction that the social welfare committee shall work for an appropriate education implies an obligation to give proper advice and guidance, and if necessary, provide practical help to give the child a proper education according to the child’s natural abilities and capacities’ SSA, chapter 6, §7, (Norström and Thunved 2004 p 133)

Nothing further is said in the text about how this legal advice should be implemented. However, the law clearly states that all placements of children and young people in care should be thoroughly supervised by responsible social workers, and the local social welfare committee. Thus, the level of interest taken in educational attainment of children placed in care is dependent on local policies and/or the individual social worker’s interest and awareness of the importance of school performance for placed children and young people.

3. What did we know at the start of the study and what questions did we need to ask?

In Sweden education has not been in focus within the field of social work, and placements in care have not been highlighted within the educational field. The ambition of joining the fields and creating a new area of interest, with all the difficulties implicated, was a great challenge for the team and the project as a whole.

The first stage of the research was to carry out a comprehensive literature review to find out what was already known (Höjer et al, 2008). In Sweden, research on children and young people has been very limited (Vinnerljung 1998). In Sweden, national registers cover the entire population. The data collected in these registers is based on the individually unique 10-digit personal identification number that follows every Swedish resident from birth to death. From register studies based on this data, we knew that educational attainments of children and young people placed in care were low, compared to their peers. Children who were objects of interventions from Social Services before their teens, or had been placed in foster care, had a two or three folded elevated risk for entering adulthood with only compulsory education. For young people who experienced interventions during their teens, the risk was approximately four fold (Vinnerljung et al 2005).

Thus, we needed to know more of how children and young people placed in care experience school, and of what support they receive from birth families, carers, social workers and teachers. As the aim of the project was to investigate the educational pathways of young men and women from a public care background, and to examine how more of these young people can be retained in education after the end of compulsory education, we also had to consider what happened to young people when they left a placement in care. Although continual support is frequent as long as young people are placed in care, research shows that social services in many cases fail to give appropriate support to young care leavers in their transition from care to independent living (Höjer & Sjöblom 2010).

4. How the research was carried out

Together with the literature review, work packages 3 and 4 form the first stage of the YIPPEE project.

WP 3: Data from the National Board of Health and Welfare made it possible to identify those individuals who had been placed in care. Variables such as number of placements, length of placements, age at first placement, type of placement etc. were combined with data from the databases GOLD and UGU. GOLD includes all individuals born 1972-1992, who lived in Sweden at 16 years of age (N=2 184 866). This database contains for example data on parents' education, family structure and all information of the educational situation of the individual (all forms of schools, grades, programmes at university, exams, study financing etc). The database on education (UGU) contains data on nine cohorts of children of which eight will be used. UGU is constituted from a 10 percent representative sample, made every fifth year. The combinations of these datasets has made it possible to identify children and young people placed in care and their school performances, and to compare these with the majority population.

WP 4: In Sweden, we interviewed 8 managers from the same local authorities used in work package 9. All interviews were transcribed and analysed, using the NVIVO 8 computer program. 111 managers were also interviewed by phone in another research project performed at the department of social work¹, and specific questions from this project is also described and analysed in work package 4. We did not collect any quantitative data in any of these interviews, as we did not expect the managers to have such information. Our quantitative data is only collected from the national databases.

WP 9: We sent out letters to 333 young people in the local authorities, and finally found 53 young people willing to complete the screening interview. Of the 53 young people, 33 finally agreed to do an in-depth interview, 9 young men and 24 young women (others agreed, but did not show up when the interview was due). In the Swedish case, due to the low number of young people willing to participate, no selection has been done except for the matter of educational promise. Initially, we identified "educational promise" as "having a pass in the four key subjects from secondary school (at age 16)". In order to reach more young people, the team decided in May 2009, to use a new definition of educational promise for the in-depth interviews: instead of having passed all four subjects in ninth grade, the new definition included having passed at least one subject and showing interest in further education. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using the NVIVO software program.

In the second round, we interviewed 26 of the 33 young people, which implies that we were unable to reach seven of those who were interviewed in the first round. All interviews in the second round were made over the phone, and were recorded and later transcribed and analysed.

25 of the 33 young people who were interviewed in-depth appointed a nominated adult, whom we could contact for an interview. 25 telephone interviews were performed with these nominated adults: 3 biological mothers, 13 foster parents (12 foster mothers and 1 foster father), 6 teachers (4 from compulsory school and 2 from high school), 1 counsellor and 2 residential home staff. All

¹ Life after care, together with Yvonne Sjöblom, Stockholm University

nominated adults were happy to participate, and pleased to be nominated. However, as few of them had been part of the young person’s whole life, they only had answers to some of the questions, which made it difficult to obtain a full picture about the young person’s life.

The interviews with the young people and the nominated adults gave us a unique opportunity to share their experiences. We felt privileged to gain all this information, and are deeply thankful to all the young people and the nominated adults.

5. Analysis of statistical data

Instead of asking the managers for statistical data as some other partner countries have done; we have analysed statistical data from the National Board of Health and Welfare, and from the databases GOLD and UGU (see separate WP 3 report from Sweden). Some results from the analysis of the data will be presented in this summary:²

- We found that almost 14 percent of children placed in care did complete compulsory school – which implies dropping out of compulsory school before the end of 9th grade. The corresponding figure for children with no experience of being placed in care is 3 percent. 5 percent of those who had been placed in care left compulsory school with no marks in any subject.
- When it comes to mean value of marks from secondary school, children who have been placed in care have significantly lower marks than their peers without experience of a placement in care.
- At upper secondary school, young people who have been placed in foster and/or residential care predominantly choose vocational programmes. As much as one fifth of young people placed in care start upper secondary school in the Individual programme (for those students who did not pass in the core subjects, and thus could not be accepted at the other programmes), and 60 percent (18 percent majority population) did not complete their three years at upper secondary school. Furthermore, marks of young people with care experiences were lower than those of the majority population.
- 13 percent of young people placed in care were registered at college/university, compared to 41 percent from the majority population.
- Altogether, these results indicate a negative situation for future access to higher and further education for this group of young people.

7. Analysis of interviews with care managers

Analysis were made both of the face-to-face interviews with the eight managers from the Local Authorities, as well as of the telephone interviews with the 111 managers in Västra Götaland and Stockholm region.

Table 1: Results from telephone interviews: Managers comments of barriers for further and higher education for young people placed in care

Categories	Frequency	Valid Percent
Social problems, lack of motivation	22	20
Inadequate previous schooling	41	37

² Population not placed in care: n=2 108 745, population placed in care: n=76 121

Inadequate support from family and network	13	12
Inadequate support from foster carers and residential staff	6	6
Neuropsychiatric diagnosis	4	4
Inadequate support from social services	7	6
Individual problems and limitations	7	6
Same barriers as for all other young people	10	9
Total	110	100
No answer	1	

A majority of the comments, in the 8 face-to-face interviews as well as in the 111 telephone interviews, focus on the young people's difficult background, with lacking support both from parents, network and schools. Young people's experiences of abuse and neglect in their birth families are also mentioned as a barrier for education. Many managers also concluded that school issues have not been highly prioritised by social services, as social services tend to focus more on social problems and/or emotional problems than on educational achievements of children and young people in care. Several managers mentioned the presumed low level of education of foster carers as a barrier, and residential units are described as having far too little focus on education. Thus, lacking experience of, and focus on, educational achievements, in birth families as well as in foster families and residential homes are some defined barriers for further education.

Table 2: Results from telephone interviews: Managers comments of facilitators for further and higher education for young people placed in care

Categories	Frequency	Valid Percent
Limited possibilities	27	25
Support from foster carers and residential homes	11	10
Support from social services	22	21
More access to individually shaped solutions	5	5
Adult education, special program at upper sec. school, folk high schools	10	9
Dependent on individual factors	11	10
Access to "ordinary" jobs	6	6
Same possibilities as anyone	15	14
Total	107	100,0
No answer	4	

As many as 27 managers stated that this group has limited possibilities to achieve well at school, and move on to higher and further education. Support from carers and from social services was mentioned as facilitators, and also access to adult education. 15 managers stated that young people formerly placed in care have the same possibilities as "anyone" to move on to further and higher education – referring to the general system of access to study-loans for all young people.

8. Analysis of the interviews with 33 young people

A holistic approach was taken to the research questions, locating the young people's educational

experience within the overall context of their lives, in and out of care. The areas covered were young people's lives at the time of first and second interviews, their current concerns, educational engagement and attainments, social relationships and informal learning and leisure time activities. Exploration of their past experiences covered life in their birth families and ongoing relations with relatives, childhood events, care careers and educational lives during the compulsory school years. It was also discussed how much support for education was provided by birth relatives, teachers, social workers, foster parents, residential carers and others. Topics also covered young person's own hopes and dreams. Most of the young people were interested in the study and very positive about contributing to it.

Present lives

Of the 33 young persons interviewed, seven lived on their own, in their own apartment. One lived with a friend and 12 lived with a partner. Eight were still living with their foster families. Two stayed with professionals/paid carers, and three lived with their birth family, or with members of the extended family. One was coded as "other" arrangements. Of the seven young people living on their own, six are girls and of the 12 living with a partner all are girls. The eight young persons still living with the foster family were all 18 or 19 years old.

Family and care lives

20 young people were placed in care when they were between 11 and 15. Three were placed before they were five years old, seven between six and 10, and one after 16. We had no information of age at first placement for two young people. 13 of the young people had only been placed once, six had been placed two times, seven three to four times, and four more than five times (no information for three young people).

The reasons for coming into care varied, but generally many told us of their lives in birth families as problematic, often characterised by the following:

- Young mothers, experiencing many problems, such as mental illness, drug and/or alcohol abuse and poverty
- Absent or/and abusive fathers
- The presence of alternating "step-fathers", in many cases causing more problems in the family
- Often a heavy burden of responsibility towards mothers (and sometimes fathers) and siblings, which made it hard to concentrate on school performances
- Little, or no, support from mothers and fathers concerning school achievements
- Poverty created a feeling of being different from their peers, and made it hard to participate in school and leisure activities.

Two of the interviewed young women were mothers, and one young man was soon to become a father at the time of the last interview. The young mothers considered their parenthood as a good thing, which had improved their lives, and the young man looked forward to becoming a father.

Educational lives

At the time of the first interview, eleven young persons were engaged in full time education, and four in part time education. Eight were employed, and two were occupied with training or an apprenticeship. Two were unemployed, and another two were on sick leave. Two had children, and were both on parental leave as their children were still very young. Two other young persons were engaged in other activities, not included in the defined categories.

Four young persons were still in upper secondary school at the time of the first interview. This is of course due to the age frame for the study; starting at the age of 18 which is an age when young men and women are "normally" doing the last year at upper secondary school. From those interviewed finishing compulsory school with basic qualifications seven had not (yet) continued their studies. One young person was enrolled in the special programme for students who do not have enough qualifications for any of the programmes in the upper secondary school curricula. Three were studying at the local adult educational programme, to complete their qualifications – or compensate for the lack of such qualifications - from upper secondary school, and two were studying at university.

At the time of the follow up interviews six of these young persons had taken up their studies at a folk high school or in adult education. Another four had finished upper secondary school. At the time of the first interview two of the 33 young persons were studying at university. At the time of the second, about a year later, another five had entered university. Interestingly enough two of them are doing social work and two nursing. Six of the seven interviewees at university at the second interview are young women.

We could identify four different groups or pathways:

- *Early interruption.* In this small group we find three young persons; one man and two women, who had not (yet) managed to finish their compulsory education. They were all placed at the age of 15 and all three report having long periods (more than three months) of absence from school. Two of them have health problems. Two were born in another country than Sweden.
- *Detour or delayed.* This group is represented by seven young persons; four males and three females who had finished compulsory school with basic qualifications but, for different reasons, had not (yet) continued to upper secondary. Some of them are working, some are unemployed at yet some are on parental leave (see above). Most of them have been placed four or five times (a range from one to six) and five report long periods of absence from compulsory school. They were all born in Sweden and two of them were placed before starting school.
- *Coming back.* In this group we find those having dropped out of secondary school (or never started) but later taken up their studies again at adult education or folk high school. In this group we found eight young persons: two males and six females. The number of placements is lower for this group; they have "only" been placed one, two or three times (mean: 2). Only one of these reports long periods of absence from compulsory school.
- *The straight way.* Here we find 15 young persons, two males and 13 females. They have all finished compulsory school as well as upper secondary without major interruptions, some are presently at university, others can apply. Eight of them were only placed once, the others two to four times. Two were placed before starting school and, quite surprisingly, seven, almost half the group, had more than three months out of school. No one reports health problems. 13 out of the 24 girls in our sample can be found in this group. 12 were placed in foster care (not kinship).

Informal learning and leisure

None of the young people participating in the Swedish study explicitly articulated that their social and leisure activities were part of, or added to, their learning identity. In their opinion, leisure

time activities were seen as free time from school or work. However, all young persons interviewed mentioned leisure time activities. Many report earlier activities that they have dropped, in most cases because they were too busy with school and/or work, or because life at the moment was so turbulent that it wasn't possible to engage in leisure time activities.

Looking ahead: hopes and dreams for the future

Most young people had an optimistic view of their future. Education had a very essential position in their thoughts about their present and their future. When they visualised themselves some years ahead, eight of them see themselves studying at the university. Seven wanted to attend adult education or vocational training. Ten picture themselves doing their “dream job”. Six, mostly girls, want to start a family in the first place, but still have dreams of education and a good job later on. When talking about the hopes and dreams, we would like to highlight what the young people themselves pictured as barriers and facilitators for moving on to higher education in the future:

Barriers for higher education	Facilitators for higher education
Dysfunctional everyday life in birth families, which made school achievements difficult	Identifying oneself as competent and as a high achiever, having a “learning identity”
A feeling of being powerless, without understanding what is happening, unable to participate in decisions, and have a say	A strong will to do better than birth mothers and fathers – to prove that it is possible to create a good life for themselves
Bullying at school – by peers, but also by teachers	A will to help other people by using own experiences
Disruptions in life – frequents changes of schools and/or placements, frequent moves	Support at school, being listened to and treated respectfully. Encouragement from teachers
Bad health – both physical and mental	Support from birth family, carers, friends
“Tug of war” between different authorities, where no one takes any responsibility for support of school performances	Not having to leave care after leaving upper secondary school – being able to stay in care for some more years until they feel ready – as “anyone”
Poverty, lack of resources	Access to adult education
Premature care leaving, no support after care leaving	Advice in financial and practical matters
Reluctance of taking study-loans – fear of not being able to pay back	
Loneliness	

9. Analysis of interviews with nominated adults

Many nominated adults (foster carers) complained over little support from social services when the placement ended after upper secondary school was completed. In many cases they had wanted young people to stay in care longer, but this was often not possible, due to administrative procedures and costs. Furthermore, the nominated adults who were foster carers stated that there is no support, nor any resources or alternative solutions for young people who want to study at a higher level. This is a barrier for young people, who may hesitate to take the step and apply for college/university, even though they may have the competence to do so. Some nominated adults also pointed out that there is a general conception that young people placed in foster/residential care do not have the capacity to be high achievers. These low expectations or aspirations may be conveyed to the young person, and consequently make them less interested in aspiring for high achievements

As a major facilitator for better educational achievements of young people in care, the nominated adults mentioned a strong cooperation between the school, the foster family and the local authority. A good dialogue between all these stakeholders is of great importance. Working together with the young person in focus is a good strategy. The encouragement should come from everyone around the young person; school, local authorities and foster families.

10. Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

One of the most important themes is the strong wish to accomplish, and create a good life, shown by a majority of our interviewees. Several compared themselves with their mothers and fathers, siblings and other relatives who had not succeeded due to various problems, and stated that their life was going to be different. They were determined to find ways to make this wish come true. Education was an important part of these life-plans. Several of the young people were close to completing an education, and others were about to start. We were impressed of the strength and determination shown by these young people. Their capacity of *resilience*, in spite of a difficult start in life, was at times quite astonishing. An important factor for the capacity of showing *resilience*, was access to support and encouragement from at least one significant adult. Those young people who had someone who could give them good advice, who believed in their capacity and competence, had managed to organise their lives and were on their way to reach their goal of “a better life”.

Children and young people from dysfunctional families, where mental illness, alcohol and drug abuse, lack of resources and poverty prevent them from focusing on educational achievements, are in a very unfortunate and unfair position, compared to their peers. One of our recommendations is therefore to find a way to provide educational support to these children and young people, to compensate for the lack of support in their families. Such support could be given in different ways, however, one prerequisite is that politicians and policy-makers are committed to address the need of educational support to children and young people from dysfunctional families, as they are the ones deciding on the financial allocations for pre-schools and schools.

When taking the decision to place these young people in care, the state has taken on a great responsibility. The parents of these young people have not, for various reasons, been capable of providing adequate care. Instead, parental care should be provided by the state – through foster care and residential care. However, through the YIPPEE project, as well as from other studies on young people leaving care (see for example Vinnerljung et al. 2005, Stein 2006, Höjer & Sjöblom 2010), the state is not always successful in its’ task as *in loco parentis*. Former welfare clients, with little or no support from birth families, are often left without support, and the outcomes of placements in care are not encouraging.

Evidently, the state need to be more aware of what is required to perform better “parenting” of young people in care, as well as of those leaving care. When it comes to the question of education, we are of the opinion that social workers, together with foster carers and residential staff, need to be more focused on the educational attainments of children and young people in care. Each child or young person needs to have their individual educational situation evaluated and discussed with those professionals responsible for their placements. At the risk of simplifying a complex process, one might say that the interest and engagement from professionals in this

respect should be equal to that of a parent.

It is also important to embrace a positive view of the opportunities of young people in care. As discussed previously in the report, professionals often tend to focus on risks and problems connected to the lives of children and young people in out-of-home care. Such a focus is important – children and young people are taken into care due to risks and problems in their lives. However, as we see it, it is also important to recognise positive features, strengths and competences of these young people. This goes for social workers, as well as teachers. Focusing on educational opportunities and strengths would help young people to gain a *positive learning identity*. According to the accounts from the young people, the perception of themselves as good learners and competent students have been gained through supportive and encouraging teachers, foster carers, and in some cases social workers.

Another important issue is connected to the procedure when young people leave care. As explained previously in the text, young people placed in out-of-home care usually leave care at 19, when they finish upper secondary school. Young people living with their birth parents are expected to leave home when they are ready to do so, not when they have reached the age of majority, or left upper secondary school. One of our recommendations is therefore to imply an individual care leaving, up to at least 23 years of age. A young person in care should be able to leave care at a time when he or she is capable to, not when reaching a certain age. Many local authorities in Sweden are small, few children are placed in care, and the creation of specialised teams would be hard to organise. From our point of view it is a question of recognising the complicated process of leaving care for young people, in relation to the prolonged transition to adulthood, and increased dependency of parents for all young people. Access to a competent contact person, who could provide practical advice and help, as well as emotional encouragement, would be a way to compensate young care leavers for the want of parental support. Such support could also help them to find pathways to higher and further education.

The access to adult education has been of great importance for several of our interviewees. Without such access, their chances of moving on to college or university would have been minimal. Therefore, maintaining, and improving, access to adult education for all young people is absolutely vital. Such access is one example of supporting structures that ought to characterise a democratic society.

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