Book review:

Education and Care Away from Home:
a review of research, policy and practice
M. BORLAND, C. PEARSON, M. HILL, K. TISDALL & I. BLOOMFIELD, 1998
Edinburgh: Scottish Council for Research in Education.
152 pp., ISBN 1 86003 043 2, paperback, £12.50

This study of children once described as 'in care' (now 'looked after away from home') was produced by the Centre for the Child and Society, University of Glasgow and commissioned by the Scottish Office. It is concerned to find out the extent to which being in public care is an educational hazard. It uses a variety of data collection techniques and is kept up-to-date by telephone checking. It focuses on how the gap between social work and education can be bridged to improve opportunities for these children. Chapter 2 surveys legal and contextual changes over the past decade, especially the trend towards greater collaboration and cooperation.

The research, carried out in Scotland in 1997, examined local provision, using United Kingdom material for comparison. It concluded that education has had a low priority, that the children's situations, characteristics and needs are diverse. Models included 'villains, victims and volunteers' (Packman) or 'protected and disaffected' (Farmer & Parker). Some, with family and abuse problems, are 'more sinned against than sinning' (p. 29), who need to benefit from educational opportunities. Schools can help, by being a major support and means of coping, or they can aggravate the problem. School reports may be the reason the child is in care. Frequently changed schools can cause adjustment problems. Schools can 'expose the child to repeated failure' (p. 33). Being taken into care 'constitutes a serious risk to progress at school for many children' (p. 36). At best, schools can promote resilience, supportive relationships, self-worth and coping skills. Often, however, they do not. Most children in care achieve below average progress and rarely make up lost ground. Half of them leave school without qualifications (the percentage for other children is 7%).

The authors use the key principles of entitlement, flexibility, personal and social development, imaginative use of resources, valuing parents and pupil empowerment (after Freire). Teachers need sensitivity, respect for confidentiality (to avoid labelling) with high academic expectations (over-sympathetic teachers can make too many allowances, which leads to under-achievement). Carers need to give education a higher priority (a high level of non-school attendance makes progress difficult). Partnership and collaboration between schools and social services is recommended as good practice, but is seen as only just beginning. The care system, the study argues, tends to focus on emotional well being first. It called for a greater concentration on education and health, involving children in the process as much as possible. Some research shows social workers as being ill-informed about their clients' education, being too ready 'to conflate performance and behaviour' (p. 75), that is confuse compliance with achievement. Children in care are without adults who take a personal interest in their education

and school, and without the educationally supportive home backgrounds that stimulate curiosity and counter truancy. The authors point out that little research has been done on the views of the children/young people themselves, yet this perspective would seem vitally important. Children in care are not a homogenous group: gender, race, class and disability (including learning difficulties) are all significant. Discontinuity of schooling, because of too frequent moving, is described as a major yet under-researched issue.

This is a helpful study helping us to focus on key research issues. Neither education nor social services come out of it well. In pointing to the need for greater collaboration and a spirit of partnership between the two agencies, it points to a challenging way forward to solve issues of under-achievement, so much so that initiatives have scarcely yet begun. In-service training can help such partnerships – indeed, training on both sides is identified as a way forward. Such training would best involve the two agencies joining and mixing for discussion on common issues.

STEPHEN BIGGER
University College Worcester, United Kingdom