Perspectives of looked after children on school experience – a study conducted among primary school children in a children's home in Singapore

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By

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Abstract

The study was conducted on the ground that the education of looked after children (specifically children in a Children's Home) is significant for their development, future success and social integration. While low attainment has been reported from research done in UK, the issue is largely neglected by researchers in Singapore. The aim of this study is to provide a description of looked after children's perspectives on their experiences in the mainstream schools in Singapore.

The study was a case study conducted in a residential home with about 40 Primary School children. The research comprises four phases of data collection. It began with a preliminary finding that looked into the demography of the children in the Home, especially their educational attainment. Next, structured interviews that explore children's perspectives concerning school, teachers, classmates, lesson time, homework, and aspiration were conducted with 21 informants. Documents that provide information about the Home's operation were also collected and examined for the understanding of the Home's environment and support for children's education. Finally, conclusions drawn from these data were used to formulate a questionnaire that involved all Primary School children in the Home.

Results from the preliminary study had confirmed that the academic achievements of children in the Home were skewed towards the lower end. While the Home had incorporated a number of measures to ensure its charges were adequately supported to meet school demands, school progress was not its main thrust and a personalized educational plan to address individual needs was not practised. Eight issues arose from the findings of the interviews and questionnaire survey. Concerning school, their general feelings, dissatisfactions, teachers' roles, relations with classmates, school transfer and aspirations were discussed. Although the Home was not the focus of the study, children's perspectives concerning the people and its environment on educational support gave the background to their experiences in school.

Ultimately, there remains a need for school and the Home to improve their facilitations to encourage school progress among looked after children. The findings suggest that information plays an important role in teachers' effectiveness and it could be acquired through training and the stipulation of regular review meetings with the Home staff. Besides collaborating with the teaching staff, the Home could consider looking into a personalized educational plan, revamp its educational support programme and physical environment, and allow children's participation in certain decision making.

DECLARATION

I, Yee Soo Chuen Celeste, declare that this thesis is the result of my own work and it has not been submitted to this or any other institutions in application for admission to a degree, diploma or any other qualifications.

STATEMENT OF COPYRIGHT

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Table of Contents

Appendices

Index of Tables

Index of Diagrams

Chapter One: Introduction

The Study and Its Justification

1.1 Background of the Research

I was once a volunteer in a Children's Home and my task was to give a group of 5 to 6 Primary School children Chinese Language tuition once a week. The commitment went on for five years. Besides having my life enriched by the experience, I noticed the majority of the children were not doing well academically. Nevertheless, it did not bother me then as I had, perhaps like many, attributed their poor academic performance to their adverse background as well as ability and willingness to learn. After all, the primary responsibility of society at large was to ensure the protection and care of this group of children, not to promote their academic success.

Years later, as an educator, I became aware of the central role education plays in the lives of children. In some sense, it has the power to make or break them as it concerns not only their current development but also future success such as employment and social integration. With this group of children who began life at a disadvantage, the issue is all the more critical. To begin with, their source of educational support comes mainly from the institution they are placed in. The Home has a significant role to play in their experiences of school as well as academic progress.

With the change of mindset came the list of questions concerning these children's education: What are their experiences in school? How much have they gained through the educational system? Are the professionals aware of their needs? Have the various ministerial departments done enough to ensure their rights?

When I started searching for answers to these questions, I was struck by the paucity of literature on the subject. The majority of the works concerning children in public care focuses on protection and care issues. Fortunately, since the publication of Sonia Jackson's seminal work in 1987, the trend took an about face in the UK. By the late 90s,

the government had made the education of looked after children its priority. Thus, works produced in the UK became my main source of inspiration and guide. Singapore, however, did not catch on this development.

1.2 Definition of the Terminology

'Looked after children' is a professional terminology used in the UK. Generally, children who are under the care of public authority are referred to as 'children in care' or 'children in public care'. It includes children 'who are the subject of a care order made by a court or children's hearing, or who are provided with accommodation by a local authority on a voluntary basis for more than 24 hours' (Flynn & Bodie 2000:1). However, since the implementation of the Children Act in 1991, 'looked after children' has become an official label representing all children for whom the local authority has some degree of formal responsibility (Jackson 1994).

Although the terminology has been applied in the UK for more than a decade, it was not adopted worldwide. Titles like 'children in out-of-home-care', 'children in out-of-home placement', and 'children in substitute care' have appeared in US literature, whereas 'children in residential care' was used by Hong Kong scholars, with the clarification that 'residential care' covers all forms of out-of-home care, both institutional and non-institutional (Tam & Ho 1993:2). In Singapore, talking to social workers, carers and legislative officers made me realize that there hasn't been a shared terminology for this group of children. They were either referred to as 'children from Children's Homes' or 'foster children'.

In the literature review of this study, the above terminologies may be used interchangeably according to their references. On the other hand, the 'looked after children' will be employed as a general term. However, since the study focuses on children in Children's Homes, 'children in residential care' will be used to refer to children whose families were in need of respite or assistance from the institutions in the local context. They may be children who were abused, abandoned, suffered from neglect

or displayed behavioural problems beyond parental control as stated in the local Children and Young Persons Act (2001).

1.3 Focus of the study

While most studies in the West sought to discover the possible causes and solutions for looked after children's low achievement, this study focuses on the educational process as experienced by children in residential care. The decision was made not only in view of the works that have been done overseas, but also with consideration to my limitations as a researcher, as will be explained in the chapter on Methodology (*see chapter 3*).

1.3.1 Research Question

Children in residential care are unique in their life experiences as compared to their peers. Each day, they proceed to school from the residential home, bringing with them their life experiences, which are likely to shape their learning and thus, their identities. In order to understand this process, research questions have been formulated as follow:

1. What have the children experienced in school?
2. How do they feel about these experiences?
3. To what extent are the children's experiences and feelings related to their background?

1.3.2 Research Scope

The investigation will be carried out in one of the Children's Homes in Singapore. Western literature has pointed to the fact of a rapid decline in the demand for residential care either due to scandals of abuse (Davis et al 1998) or policies that favour alternative support such as family centres and fostering (Skinner 1992). Nonetheless, the place of residential care in children's welfare continues to be affirmed by many scholars (Berridge 1985; Bennathan 1992; Rutter 2000). Besides having the advantage of specialized staff, it also offers "a more 'neutral' environment for containing acting out behaviour" (Jones 1995:9).

The decision to study only one Home was first made in consideration of the limited resources available in Singapore and my ability to gain access to official data as a research student. On the other hand, a case study has the advantage of an ethnographic work as findings could be evaluated against context. It furnishes the analysis and allows a more in-depth look at the children's perspectives. Again, details of various considerations pertaining to approach are presented in chapter 3.

The participants in this study are Primary 1-6 children. They are the main age group in the Children's Home. Preschoolers and Secondary school students are not included in this study as their schools' environment and expectations are different. Likewise, the choice enables me to focus on a narrower context.

1.4 Understanding of the Context

1.4.1 Education in Singapore with specific reference to Primary School

Being a young country, and one that is always looking ahead to maintain an edge in the international arena, Singapore has made many changes to its educational system. One constant feature in all these changes is its goal to produce a high level taskforce that will continue to sustain the nation's economic development. Since the city-country is short of natural resources, such ambition gives no cause to criticism.

Hence, like some other Asian countries, education is the most important thing in the lives of most children in Singapore. First, *it constitutes a substantial part of their childhood.* An average Primary School student spends 6 to 9 hours each day in school and another 2-4 hours on home assignments or attending tuition classes during school days. Next, *it is competitive.* Founded on the ideology of meritocracy, all students are ranked according to their academic performance and so are expected to strive for their best. 'Streaming' has always been a source of anxiety for schools, students and their families (Ow 1999) as landing in a better class confers not only pride but also assurance of a brighter prospect. Finally, *it concerns their future.* Each academic success and failure seems to have a cumulative effect on what it will lead to and consequently impacting their life trajectory.

As a result, school is the centre next to family that moulds a child's intellectual, social and emotional development, as well as future.

With regard to structure, local children often begin by entering some form of educational institution at the age of 3, if not earlier. Day cares, kindergartens and various enrichment courses are thriving industries though not compulsory. Parents know too well that their children need to be 'equipped' with a good amount of language and arithmetic skills before they start their formal education at the age of 6, which is the beginning of Primary One. Primary school education is compulsory and comprises six years education. According to the Education Statistics Digestion (Ministry of Education 2003), the six-years' education consists of two stages: the foundation stage (from primary one to four) and the orientation stage (from primary five to six). Students are streamed within school after the completion of the foundation stage according to their language (bi-lingual) and arithmetic abilities. As the nation is made up of different races and English being the official language, each student is required to do two languages, which is English and a mother tongue. In the past, there were three streaming categories: EM1, EM2 and EM3; EM1 has been removed from the ranks in 2004. Those who show exceptional talent are invited to participate in the gifted programme starting from primary four. All children will sit for the national Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) when they reach primary six. The result determines not only the kind of Secondary School they could apply to, but also the courses they could enrol in. These are broadly classified as follows: special, express, normal academic and normal technical course.

1.4.2 Social Services in Singapore with specific reference to Residential Homes

Social services in Singapore are overseen by two main bodies: the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) and the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), the former being a governmental institution and later, a statutory board.

Children and young persons in need of protection and care are under the charge of either MCYS or the Police. A standard is set that efforts should be made to prevent unnecessary separation of children from their homes and to strengthen family

relationships (Children's Bureau 1990). If such attempts failed, foster care would be recommended while residential placement serves as the last resort.

A total of 20 residences are in operation under the umbrella of 16 Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs) (National Council of Social Service 2003). The VWOs are non-profit-making voluntary set-ups, which work with volunteers, government authorities, public and private organisations and the community. Founded on the ideology that a social-welfare state will only hinder development, Singapore does not have any state-run residences.

According to the *Standards Manual on Children and Youth Homes* (National Council of Social Service 1994), there is currently no legislation for the control, inspection and licensing of Residential Homes. Besides the Manual and the Best Practice Guideline, the Homes are autonomous in their planning and operation. The overall objective spelled out in the *Manual* was,

> Services provided in these Homes are aimed at helping these (their) clients as well as their families in overcoming these (their) social and emotional difficulties so that these children and young persons can realise their potential and to lead happy and productive lives. (1994:6)

1.4.3 Children's Rights in Singapore with specific reference to the Education of Looked After Children

Children in Singapore are regarded as valued members of society and their well-being, health, education and development are of a high priority in the nation-state. This is evident in Singapore's accession to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1995 (Singapore Initial Report to the UN Committee).

The Ministry of Community Development and Sports (former MCYS) has affirmed its stand on the status of children in the statement entitled the 'Best Interests of the Child'. Organizations working with children are 'strongly encouraged to design and administer

their services and programmes, with the best interests of the child in mind' (MCDS website).

In social work practices, the Social Welfare Department has stated in 1976 that the role of social welfare is 'to enable the individual to be aware of and take advantage of his rights and to assist him to contribute to society's welfare and development according to the limits of his potential.'

Concerning education, although not mandatory, the *Standards Manual on Children and Youth Homes* (National Council of Social Service 1994) has recommended that 'whenever possible, community, educational and recreational facilities compatible with the individual needs of the child/youth in care are utilised to allow for normal community experiences.' Currently, most children who are looked after by welfare institutions attend mainstream schools. This may be an avenue to prepare them for social integration as it allows the Homes' children a life that is shared with their peers.

However, none of the above statements/edicts mentioned anything about children's views. The voice of children has been an important issue in the UK after the enforcement of its Children's Act in 1989 (Sherwin 1996). The emphasis on consulting with children was said to be consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Children, as it (article 12) requires all countries agreeing to the convention to assure children the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them (Smith 1996).

1.4.4 Sociological and Social Research in Singapore with specific reference to the Education of Looked After Children

Sociological research topics and methodology in Singapore have for the most part been shaped by broader national concerns arising from rapid economic development in the nation-state (Yee & Chua 1999). A review of social work studies on Singapore society during the period 1965-1983 has shown that there is a lack of empirical studies, in the form of surveys and intensive interviews (Chen 1986). The regional seminar of Asia & Pacific Association of Social Work Education (APASWE) in 1985 recognized the fact that the region's social work practices relied heavily on western literature and there is a

need for a regional and indigenous approach (Ow 1999). With the establishment of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) in 1985, sociological interest was in general geared towards gender roles and feminism during the period between 1985 to 1995 (Yee & Chua 1999).

In 1996, Singapore Children's Society published its first research monograph on the public perception of child abuse and neglect in Singapore. It was followed by a series of four other monographs of similar themes in 2000, 2002, and 2003. Besides, Cherian & Tan published a book on the at-risk children, *Resilient Periwinkles*, in 1999. However, work concerning children's plight remained sparse. Children in Residential Homes have rarely captured the attention of local research, not to mention issues of their education. Obviously, the country's social research is still in its fledgling stage and has a long way to go in order to match those of other developed nations.

1.5 Significance of the Issue

The focus of this study is the education of looked after children. Education is critical in the lives of these children for the following reasons:

1.5.1 Education and Development

As it was mentioned, school takes on a centre stage in the lives of children. Not only is it a place where various knowledge and skills could be acquired, it also exposes children to varied experiences and challenges fitting for their age, and provides a social ground for relationships to be developed with peers and people in authority. In other words, school is both academic and social, and it has an impact on children's emotional development (Bennathan 1992). Carefully administered, it offers a wide range of learning experiences and emotional support which children in adverse circumstances can benefit from (Galligan 1998). Moreover, as the lives of many looked after children are marked by fragmentation and troubles, school is likely to be the only constant source of stability for them (Firth & Horrocks 1996).

1.5.2 Education and Life Chances

Although failure in school does not necessarily lead to failure in one's career, for most people, 'entry-tickets to life' are largely gained at school (Fletcher-Campbell, 1998: 4). In a meritocracy society, education is one vital avenue which children could take on in order to excel and live out their dreams. Such an opportunity is particularly crucial for children who begin their lives at a disadvantage. Without family support and financial capability, looked after children risk a higher chance of becoming underachievers and have a lower likelihood of making it far in their education. Ultimately, they also risk repeating family history and may end up living lives like that of their parents. One way to escape such a disadvantage is through educational attainment (Jackson 1994).

1.5.3 Education and Integration

Integration is one of the priorities in the local social services. The Social Welfare Department (1976: 2) writes,

> In relation to social integration, the general objective of all social welfare intervention should be to increase unity, solidarity and the morale of society through the foregoing activities; through the enhancement of life by its supportive activities; and through implementing programmes reflecting society's concern for its more vulnerable members.

For young children, integration could be found in formal education. The social setting school encompasses is a platform for normalization. Besides, children are prepared for citizenship through civic education and the teachings of racial harmony. All in all, success in education will enhance their ability to become responsible members of society, which will in turn help to strengthen social cohesion.

1.5.4 Education and Equality

Equality is an important aspect in a democratic society, and education, an important means to achieve it. In the discussion of equality in education, a primary issue rests with

the educational opportunity. Schools are meant to be accessible to all regardless of individuals' race, language, gender, class and background. However, the ever-changing world has also brought about changes to schools' operation. In the UK, the Education Reform Act 1988 and the Education Act 1993 have established schools in the market place. The effect is said to be detrimental to the most vulnerable children in the society as these legislative measures make schools less willing to tolerate those children who may have difficulty adjusting to changes in their lives (Firth & Horrocks 1996). Education is a competitive industry in Singapore. Children who are educationally disadvantaged due to familial background can put a school's tolerance to test as their presence may tarnish its reputation or lower its ranking. While there have been many debates from different perspectives (Beardmore 1975; Bourdieu 1986/1997; Tooley 1994; Lauder & Hughes 1999; etc), education remains an important avenue for equality as it provides for social mobility.

1.6 Aims and Objectives of the Study

This study of the education of looked after children in Singapore hopes to attain the following aims and objectives:

Children: Children should be given a voice in issues concerning them. Looked after children as a minority in school and society are entitled to a hearing of what their perspectives are. It is hoped that an understanding of their perspectives will bring about meaningful changes in the institutions which oversee their welfare.

Residential Homes: It will likely give the staff a greater awareness of what the children's experiences and feelings are concerning schools. Besides, Home management may be able to use the findings to evaluate its educational support programme, which includes children's counselling on schools' issues, Home and schools' cooperation and the arrangement of enrichment classes.

Schools: As a minority in the school context, the mainstream schools may have overlooked the needs of looked after children. School management could benefit from

what these children have to say and use their views as another benchmark to assess its policy, curriculum and teachers' training.

Society: Although the interests of our children are among the national priorities, their perspectives are seldom sought. Their rights and interests are often articulated by adult caregivers and professionals. This is probably one of the few studies in Singapore where children are asked what they think. Allowing children to speak for themselves is another approach that our society could take to understand what is best for the younger generation.

Field of study: Since there is a gap in the research on the education of looked after children in Singapore, this study aims to generate awareness and interest in the topic. As for overseas literature, though much good work has been done in the field of study, few had focused on young people's perspectives. This study could therefore contribute to what is lacking in the research field in general.

In short, it is hoped that by discovering looked after children's school perspectives, the study will facilitate greater understanding and communication among the principal partners, which include children, residential homes, schools, and welfare agencies.

1.7 Limitation of the Study

While the study ventures out to seek the voices of looked after children concerning their experiences in school, generalization is restricted by at least two pre-determined conditions. First, it has a specific context as the research was conducted in a selected children's Home and the Home, as all others, has its own distinctive features and mission statement. Next, there is an age limit to the population, and it involved only children in the mainstream Primary School.

It is possible that the choice of having primary school age children as sole participants has added another level of limitation to the study. As young as they were, the participants were likely to be restricted by their verbal skills and anxiety of having to be

questioned by a stranger during the interviews. In turn, reflective and analytical statements about their experiences were hard to come by. Without the verification from adults' perspectives, it would inevitably confine the scope of data. The shortcoming, however, was compensated by the fact that school was a familiar setting to these children. As Thomas (2005) has pointed out, children are competent to voice their views so long they are asked about things that make sense to them and the process is aided by a sensitive approach.

Finally, while the study comprised four phases of data collection that spanned over a period of two years, numerous changes had taken place in the Home during this time. The change in the Home's demography was constant since parents were free to exercise their rights to withdraw their child/children as and when they felt ready for their restoration and new admission could take place any time of the year. In response, the study did not hinge on a systematic selection of individuals but on children who were available and fit the research criteria. What was less expected was the major restructuring that went on in the Home. During the two-year period, the Home had torn down old premises, built new ones to accommodate a new extension of its service provision, which also led to a change in office location as well as organization. Moreover, before the last phase of data collection, the Home had a new director who was not engaged to review the study. All in all, these developments are believed to have their effects on children's views especially when the matter of discussion touches on the Home environment.

1.8 Organization of the Study

This thesis is made up of three main sections. The first section, which has three chapters, lays the foundation of the study. The introductory chapter provides the contextual circumstances, significance, and overall direction of the topic. The second chapter gives an overview of the findings that have been published concerning the education of looked after children. Given its novelty in the local field, almost all of the literatures cited here are works from the western world and priority was given to those that deal with fundamental issues rather than corrective measures in view of the problem. Chapter three

consists of four parts: the justification of methodology, description of research design, documentation of data collection process and elucidation of analyses method.

The second section concerns the body of collected data and their findings, and it has four chapters. Chapter four presents the results from a preliminary study at the Home and provides an overview of its demography, children's placement history and school performance. Chapter five is the product of secondary sources- *documents collected from the Home.* The chapter aims at providing critical information concerning the experiences of the participants at the Home by revealing the Home's mission statement, structural organization and practices. Chapter six and seven bring the study to a climax as they unfold the themes concerning children's perspective with regard to their experiences in schools and at the Home, respectively. They are the results of data collected from the interviews and questionnaire survey. Eight themes have been developed, six concerning school and two, the Home.

The last section has only one concluding chapter. It summarizes the main findings from the second section, discusses the implications of the findings on schools and residential homes, and provides recommendations for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The Education of Looked After Children

Among many issues concerning looked after children, education was known to have long been overlooked by both researchers and practitioners (Jackson 1988-9; Fletcher-Campbell & Hall 1990; Goddard 2000; Flynn & Brodie 2000). Prior to Sonia Jackson's seminal paper in 1987, only a handful of books and articles elaborated on the subject (Jackson 1989). Her work was significant in exposing the dire effect of such negligence and sparking off a number of other related works (Fletcher-Campbell & Hall 1990; Stein 1994; Walker 1994; Firth and Horrocks 1996, etc). Nevertheless, interest in the subject was further spurred only a number of years later when a succession of official statistics and findings were published in the UK. The late 1990s witnessed the British government acknowledging education as a key element in the welfare of children (Flynn & Brodie 2000) and school inclusion as a matter of importance (Coulling 2000). Consequently, a bulk of research was produced in the country with topics ranging from identifying problems to evaluating various solutions. Such fervour to redress the disadvantage of looked after children through education, however, was not prevalent elsewhere. Hence, a majority of works cited in this chapter comes from the United Kingdom. Their findings form the base of the literature review.

This chapter looks into three main areas concerning the education of looked after children. First, to highlight the significance of the topic, it presents the likely causes and consequences for the negligence of their education. Second, factors that were identified to have an impact on their school progress are illustrated to provide an overview of the positive and negative experiences of children looked after by public carers. Finally, recommendations found in the literature are also included as they may be useful references for the study. Each theme ends with a section on the discussion of its relevance to the Singapore context, as well as the study in question.

2.1 The cause and effect of neglecting looked after children's education

Various reasons were offered (Jackson 1989; Fletcher-Campbell & Hall 1990; Goddard 2000; etc) for the initial dearth of references on the education of looked after children and they could be summarized as follows:

Public carers' low priority: The training of public carers had always put physical and emotional needs of separated children as their priority, so much so that education, which was perceived to be a future need, has been compromised (Fletcher-Campbell & Hall 1990). The educational success of these children was simply not conceived to be part of their responsibility. To justify their position, it had been argued that such assurance would not be available if these children remained with their parents, thus it should not be expected in the public care system (Jackson 1989).

Low expectation of educational success: Most people who came into contact with looked after children tended to be sceptical about their ability to cope with academic demands (Jackson 1989). They were likely to attribute such low expectation to the genetic makeup, adverse background or disruptive schooling of these children. Hence, social workers and carers often had other goals on their agenda (Jackson 1988-9), and teachers who knew little about looked after children were inclined to lower their expectation out of sympathy (Goddard 2000).

A clear divide between the education and care systems: Apparently, literature concerning care systems did not usually recognize education as an important aspect in the life of looked after children. Likewise, rarely would looked after children be identified as people with 'special education needs' (Jackson 1989; Fletcher-Campbell & Hall 1990; Gilligan 1998) by educationists since "school difficulties are not as dramatic as homelessness or mental illness or child abuse," according to Holmes (1977-8:22). As a result, the subject simply slipped through the 'great divide'.

Lack of official interest: Children in care amounted to only a small percentage of their peers. Not only their educational concern was less dramatic, their status was also more fluid (Fletcher-Campbell & Hall 1990). Official interest in the education of these children was slow to take off (Goddard 2000). As a result, there was a great shortage of

data, which in turn hindered awareness and action (Fletcher-Campbell & Hall 1990; Jackson 1994).

Such negligence had its consequences and they were reflected in the startling figures on their school exclusion and failure shown in a number of academic works (Stein 1994; Firth and Horrocks 1996; Francis 2000; Jackson & Sachdev 2001; Elliott 2002). The fate of failure appeared to be inescapable for the majority of looked after children. Here are some descriptions of the situation:

School Exclusion: In 1992, Bennathan cautioned that exclusion was on the rise for troubled children. According to a regional survey cited by Firth and Horrocks (1996:76), "a child living in a children's home is eighty times more likely to be excluded from school than a child living with his or her family." And, the situation is expected to deteriorate with age (Borland 2000). Children and young people in care are at a disproportionate risk of exclusion as their educational experiences are likely to be demonstrably worse than those of their peers (Blyth & Milner 1996).

Qualification and Employment: Estimation was that seventy-five percent of this group left formal education with no qualifications (Elliott 2002). For those who went on further education, fewer than one in a hundred made it to university (Jackson & Sachdev 2001). Stein (1994), based on his three 'leaving care' studies, establishes that they were "ill-prepared" for the competitive market and consequently, employment was difficult. A couple of figures from his works sum up the state of affair: only 13% were in full-time employment (*Prepared for Living*) and 80% were living on or near the poverty line (*Living Out of Care*).

School Failure and Self-esteem: Failure at school for this group of youngsters could damage their morale and self-esteem, and further discourage future engagement in learning (Fletcher-Campbell 1998). Pringle & Bossio (1965), as they research children who have experienced early separation from parents, especially mothers, find maladjustment to be apparent among them as compared to their peers. When such emotional setback is coupled with school failure, the prospect of them attaining a meaningful life becomes dimmer.

Social Integration: Youngsters with the experience of public care are said to have a high representation in the homelessness, teenage pregnancy and crime rates (Bennathan 1992; Firth & Horrocks 1996; Stein 2002). The UK's National Foster Care Association, as published by the Stirling Council (Sept 99 n.p.) has made these estimations:

> *Children and young people in the UK, under the age of 16, who are accommodated by local authorities are 10 times more likely to be excluded from school, 12 times more likely to leave school without qualifications, 4 times more likely to be unemployed between the ages of 16 and 24, if females, 4 times more likely to be pregnant or already have a child than other adolescent females.*

As it was seen from above, educational disadvantage often leads to other disadvantages in lives. For children leaving care, employment is their means to deter patterns of family disadvantage to be repeated (Jackson 1989). Yet, in a modern society, stable employment is hard to come by without the support of paper qualifications. Although one cannot simply attribute poor performance to the looked after experience, the fact that coming into care carries a high risk of educational failure is unquestionable (Jackson 1989). In the view of Goddard (2000), these disadvantages took place against a relatively promising background in which increasing numbers of young people had been moving on to further and higher education.

Relevance to the study

While little has been said and done about the education of looked after children in Singapore, UK's published works argue for the significance of the issue. In whichever context, looked after children were very small in number, perhaps even smaller in Singapore. This, however, does not negate their rights to have their best interests protected as declared by the MCDS (*see 1.4.3*). That said, as minors, unless adults advocate their needs and interests, there is little chance they can do so for themselves.

Locally, the few research works that concern the welfare of looked after children focus mainly on care and protection for their emotional and physical needs (e.g. Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports 2005, Research monographs 1996, 2000,

2002, 2003, Cherian & Tan 1999). Neglect of educational needs is manifested in the scant attention that the issue has thus far received. The causes for such neglect are likely to be similar to what has been described above: low priority, low expectation, lack of collaboration between agencies concerned and lack of official interest. As for the consequences, it is highly possible that they are also taking place in the local scene. Indeed, there is a need for official interest to help raise public's awareness and improve the life chances of these children. As for this study, it will look into the school performance of children in a residential home. The results will bear witness as to whether they are more susceptible to failures and whether school exclusion is a problem here.

2.2 The factors for and against school progress

While there is an apparent discrepancy between the academic attainments of looked after children and children who have not experienced the care system, we will first look at the various factors that have been offered to explain the phenomenon:

2.2.1 Factors that discourage school progress

Pre-care Experience

Children who are cared for away from home often have a dysfunctional home background. The work of Fisher et al (1986) shows a large proportion of them coming from families with a complex and impermanent structure, whereas Bebbington & Miles (1989) find a high representation of single parents. While a child's ability for language development and learning could be undermined by poor parent-child relationship (Pringle 1965), these children's early experience in life has already put them at a disadvantage. Such conclusion resonates with the work of Holmes (1977-78) who suggests that children with a traumatic past have learnt that adults are not to be trusted and life is unpredictable from a very young age. These assumptions will continue to disrupt their emotion and motivation to learn. As observed by Osborn (1990), there is a higher risk in attainment and behaviour with the most disadvantaged children.

The socio-economic background of these children is another area of pre-care deprivation. Deprivation is said to be a common factor among looked after children (Bebbington & Miles 1989). Their parents are more likely to be of lower educational level, have limited income and lack resources (Jackson 1989). Poverty has its consequences in a child's formal education. In associating school achievement and home situation, Buttrick (1992) suggests that poor children are more likely than non-poor children to be low achievers in school. This is because parents who are disadvantaged in material means usually have low priority and expectation for children's education (St Claire & Osborn 2001). Besides being poor, they are also more often than not plagued by psychological problems (Minty 2000). As a result, they are unable to provide a head start for their children to meet the demands of mainstream schools. Heath, Colton and Aldgate (1989) find that even if these children are placed in a better environment later in life, the likelihood of them remaining as underachievers is still high. To conclude, early adversity has a long-term effect on learning (Borland 2000).

Finally, Minty (2000) has pointed out that much abuse and neglect starts out with children showing more problems and developmental deficiencies in childhood. Without early intervention, their problems persist and manifest themselves in school performance. On the other hand, children admitted at an older age might come with a history of behavioural problems and learning difficulties (Jackson 1989; St Clair & Osborn 2001; Bebbington & Miles 1997; Lambert et al. 1977; Francis 2000). All these add to the possibility of children in care not doing well in school.

Despite the above, there are those who believe giving early childhood experience as the reason for children's underachievement is only an excuse (Jackson 1989; Firth & Horrocks 1996). Their pre-care disadvantages are not irrevocable (Rutter 2000), if greater efforts and early intervention could be elicited from those in authorities.

Care Experience

Although pre-care experiences were accepted as a viable reason for poor school attainment of looked after children, many researchers feel that their persistent failure has much to do with the care system. To begin with, the social work practice does not encourage educational progress. While social workers are aware of the various needs of looked after children, low priority has been accorded to education (Jackson 1989; Fletcher-Campbell & Hall 1990; Francis 2000). In the words of Walker (1994:340), "Education is seen exclusively as a matter of entitlement, opportunity and attainment and, therefore, outside the remit and jurisdiction of social services authorities."

Such attitude is evident in how social workers handle children's placement. In the views of looked after children, social workers seldom consider giving school and education primacy in times of change. Many have to go through multiple placements coupled with abrupt school transfers. Each move necessitates ties being severed and progress disrupted (Buchanan 1995). The effect of instability and lack of continuity eventually shows up in their school performance (Jackson 1989; Fletcher-Campbell 1998). This explains why social workers are frequently thought of as people who hinder educational progress (Harker et al 2003).

Gilligan (1998), on the other hand, speaks of social work's failure to appreciate school as a powerful institution in the social development and protection of children. School is second only to the family as a place of influence and guidance. So, there is no reason why social workers should not work with schools in meeting children's needs. An explanation for the shortcoming is the heavy workload of the social workers (Morris 2000; Francis 2000). They are said to be bogged down by too many cases and barely have enough time to fulfil their statutory duties.

Besides social work practice, care experience also includes the set-up of the environment. While public care comes in many forms, the focus here is residential homes. Those who have advocated for greater attention to be paid to the education of looked after children feel that there is a need for public carers to recognize their role as 'public parents'. Given that residential care has nothing which resembles a normal home, to know its impact on children's educational attainment, we need to survey four aspects of a Home's organization: priority, physical environment, programme and personnel.

In terms of priority, residential homes share much similarity with its social work counterpart. Many carers believe their responsibility is to provide for immediate needs; whereas long-term developmental needs are beyond their capability. The lacklustre attitude is also evident in the lack of assessment and acknowledgement of children's progress. Harker et al (2003:95) remarks, "some carers were described as failing to encourage children to attend school, neglecting to ask about school progress or show an interest in school reports, limited support for homework, and poor attendance at school events." Because of low priority, looked after children are likely to be treated as an educationally homogeneous group, which marks the pitfall of many residential homes (Berridge 1985; Fletcher-Campbell & Hall 1990).

Physical environment and programme are signs of a residential home's priority and they are often interrelated. For the most part, the environments are not always conducive for educational activities. Children of school age may have difficulties locating a quiet study area or key books for reference (Goddard 2000; Rees 2001). The absence of suitable reading materials is said to have hampered literacy progress (Jackson 1994). There is also the likelihood that leisure and recreation times are not maximized to attain certain educational goals.

Residential staff may have been the source for reinforcing children's own indifference to education (Firth & Horrocks 1996). Their low expectation and lack of interest in education were said to have stemmed from their low education (Martin & Jackson 2002). Because of this sense of professional marginality (Fletcher-Campbell and Hall, 1990), they often avoid face-to-face encounters with teachers and choose the telephone instead (Firth & Horrocks 1996). As a result, they would rather be over-preoccupied with what goes on within the institution, and view school as a foreign territory (Jackson 1989).

A final point to raise comes from the findings of Lambert et al (1977). They have concluded that the school behaviour of children who had been in care by the age of 11 was poorer than that of children never in care. In other words, the experience of coming into care has not helped these children. This is another example of how residential homes continue to be a place of 'containment'.

School Experience

School plays an important role in the lives of children. Apart from home, it is another arena for consistency, role models and solidarity. Children are likely to discover their talents and identities through the school process. However, for looked after children, their experience in school can be tainted by differential treatment and discontinuity.

Low expectation is one of the frequently mentioned problems of looked after children in schools (Fletcher-Campbell & Hall 1990; Firth & Horrocks 1996; Elliott 2002). To understand the connection between teacher expectations and student achievements, we could turn to the Pygmalion theory, introduced by Rosenthal & Jacobson in 1968. One study based on the theory maintains that teacher expectations do play a role in how well and how much students learn (Cooper & Tom 1984) and Elliot (2002) reports that teachers generally have a lower expectation of looked after children on meeting homework deadlines. They also believe these children are more likely to become the victims of bullying. On the other hand, Fletcher-Campbell & Hall (1990) raised the issue of misplaced focus in review sessions as, more often than not, behaviour and attendance rather than academic progress and achievement are being discussed.

Two main reasons are given for the generally low expectation of the teaching profession. First, teachers are not trained to understand the complexity of looked after children (Borland 2000; Elliott 2002). Many operate on misguided assumptions of what these children need. Second, there is no strategy to ensure that the education of looked after children is appropriately planned and monitored (Borland 2000). This may account for the extensive non-attendance and exclusion of these children (Warren 1997).

While teachers are ill-equipped for the task, their attitude may have caused many looked after children to think that they have received differentiated treatment in school. Such understanding works against their progress as young children's feelings about school and themselves as learners have important implications for their emotional well-being and success in school (Valeski & Stipek 2001). Next to parents, teachers are the most influential group of people in their lives (Bennathan 1992). Without the encouragement

and motivation to learn and excel, chances are, school would end up being no more of a normalizing institution for them (Fletcher-Campbell & Hall 1990).

If teachers are largely responsible for not setting higher goals, peers in schools are answerable for distracting looked after children and undermining their desire to succeed academically. It happens by way of bullying (Harker et al. 2003; Elliot 2000), differential treatment (Kahan 1979; Berridge 1985) and exclusion (Jackson 1994). A contributing factor for these experiences may be traced to their unstable placement. Each change not only involves disrupting school life and severing relationships (Ridge & Miller 2000; Harker et al 2003), but also having to start anew in a strange environment.

Lastly, the changing school system should not be overlooked. Bennathan (1992) reminds us that two factors discourage Head teachers from keeping difficult students in schools and they are: the loss of power of LEA (Local Education Authority) and decline in support services in Britain. On the other hand, the marketisation of schools has proven to be detrimental to the most vulnerable children in society (Jackson 1994; Firth & Horrocks 1996). While schools compete for the patronage of parents in order to improve funding, students with a problematic background are likely to encounter discrimination since their presence could appear to be offensive.

Structural Deficiency and Inter-agencies Communication

Many have raised the issue of the ineffectual collaboration among agencies (Jackson 1989; Fletcher-Campbell & Hall 1990; Walker 1994; Fletcher-Campbell 1998; Borland 2000), namely the social work department, education department and legal carers. Although they all have a certain amount of responsibility for the children in care, each seems to operate independently with its own agenda. And education was often given a low priority (Walker 1994).

Findings in Francis (2000) help to illustrate the patchy roles of social workers, carers and teachers. Children's educational arrangements are a joint responsibility between social workers and carers, but carers are likely the ones involved in their schools' activities. During the review of a child's educational progress, teachers are usually absent. Yet,

teachers largely hold a pessimistic prognosis of the children's academic performance, but such anxieties are not always shared by social workers and carers. Perhaps this explains why young people in the Scottish Office's report (1994b) pleaded for more effective communication between teachers and care staff in order that their schooling and social or emotional needs are appropriately met (Borland 2000).

Finally, not incorporating an education plan in a child's care plan could be the main problem in structural deficiency (Fletcher-Campbell 1998). Without the incorporation, it would be harder for inter-agency cooperation to take place. The results include school sessions interrupted by social work priorities (Jackson 1994) and children do not find the support they need to make progress in schools.

2.2.2 Factors that encourage school progress

Notwithstanding the prevalent low attainment among looked after children, there are those who survived the system and their own adversities. Several researches were conducted in the quest to learn the contributing factors that motivate children to learn. The findings are equally important as they could help us identify the factors that will help raise the academic standard of looked after children.

Undifferentiated Treatment

Looked after children are eager to be treated the same as others. Almost all children stressed the importance of 'normalization' in their daily lives (Martin & Jackson 2002; Tveit & Arnesen 2004). Not only that they resent the negative stereotyping of looked after children for being lower in intelligence and more problematic in behaviour, they also hope to enjoy similar opportunities that are afforded their peers such as participation in outside hobbies and interests, and further studies.

Parental Expectation

Although many children are in care because of familial crisis, they are said to show enormous loyalty to their birth parents (Brannen et al 2000). Keeping the family tie thus is crucial for children's development. The assumption that contact with malfunctional parents harmed children in placement was found to be overstated in the work of Weiner & Weiner (1990). On the contrary, parents are potential allies of teachers in motivating children to learn and succeed (Martin & Jackson 2002). It has more to do with their attitude than ability. Osborn (1990) concludes that children whose parents hoped they would go on to higher education were 12 times more likely to achieve competence, whereas Coulling (2000) discovered that a child with supportive birth parents, though fostered, is more likely to succeed in education.

Care and Encouragement

Positive encouragement plays a crucial role. Martin & Jackson (2002) notice most of the high achievers have at least one person, within or outside the care system, who listens to them and makes them feel valued. These significant others will be the ones who recognise their achievements and help boost their confidence (Jackson & Sachdev 2001). They are also the ones who provide encouragement for higher education and practical support.

a) ***Social workers:*** Looked after children long to have a good relationship with their social workers (Morris 2000). After all, they are the ones who have the solutions to their problems. To build rapport, it is important for social workers to start by showing a genuine concern for their welfare (Martin & Jackson 2002). This will lead to greater understanding of their clients' needs and more effective support.

b) ***Residential staff:*** According to Harker et al (2003), residential carers show interest in the children's education by regularly checking on their progress, emphasizing the importance of education and encouraging them to succeed. In the view of Martin & Jackson (2002), what really matters is their qualification as it is a key that equips them with the knowledge needed to help children attain school progress.

c) ***Teachers:*** Teachers are the ones who have the greatest involvement with the general body of children (Gilligan 1998). Therefore, it is not surprising that they should top the list of people who provide the main source of emotional and academic support (Harker et al. 2003). For teachers to be effective, looked after children feel that there is a need for them to be better informed of their care situation (Martin & Jackson 2002).

d) ***Peers:*** The work of Harker et al. (2003) has found peers to be a valuable support too. While friendship is an important aspect in children's emotional development, having friends who care about their progress could provide positive influence. In fact, Jackson & Martin (1998) notice that, for the looked after children, having friends outside care who did well at school emerged to be most helpful. The problem is looked after children will find maintaining friendship a great challenge as their placements are highly unstable.

Conducive environment

Positive outcomes are demonstrated by Homes which have made an effort to turn their environment into one that is conducive for school age children (Harker et al 2003, Gallagher et al 2004). In order to encourage learning, they have ensured that supportive factors such as quiet spaces, key books, educational resources and leisure activities are available and accessible to their charges. This is perhaps the reason why some young respondents feel that coming into care could actually be a positive experience

Relevance to the study

The citations in this section represent at least 15 years of researching into the education of looked after children by various scholars and agencies. An overarching theme that connects their works is their aspiration to raise the achievement level of looked after children. Hence, much effort was put into identifying factors that cause low attainment or promote school progress. Although this study embraces a different agenda, as it does not intend to explain the causes for children's attainment but seek to provide a descriptive account of children's experience, the findings are valuable in offering an exhaustive list

of references for understanding looked after children's perspectives. Factors such as pre-care experience, care experience and school experience are illustrative of the major components of their lives. Nonetheless, given the different contexts, the illustrations are not expected to represent the lives of looked after children here but function as a checklist for the researcher to examine their various experience.

Besides, the factors are also useful yardsticks for gauging whether positive influences are apparent in the lives of the informants. They have provided the framework for the study to explore areas like informants' perspectives of the treatment they receive from school teachers, parental involvement in their education, the likely sources of care and encouragement and the residential home's support for education.

2.3 Recommendations for service improvement

Conduct a survey of the current research in the education of looked after children and one will notice the shift of focus from identifying problems in order to raise awareness to recommending changes in order to see improvement. Improvement is necessary given that the primary function of care does not only consist of maintenance and protection, but also compensation and preparation (Gilligan 1999). Such endeavour ought to be built on two convictions:

Education takes priority: As already noted, one of the main problems with the underachievement of looked after children is the prevailing low expectation of social workers, teachers and carers. Few recognize what education can achieve for this group of children (Fletcher-Campbell 1990; Jackson 1994; Gilligan 1998; Borland 2000). Certainly, their prioritisation of welfare above education concerns should be challenged (Stein 1994). Unless there is a turn about in their mindset, no amount of change would result in school progress for the children.

Early intervention helps: People have low expectation because they are generally sceptical about looked after children's ability to achieve. Rutter (2000), however, argues that high quality intervention and systematic evaluation at the individual level are likely

to rectify the disadvantages experienced in early lives. Early education intervention is therefore recommended if progress is to be secured (Borland 2000).

Below are the suggested frameworks for improvement:

2.3.1 Improve Inter-professional Collaboration

Children in care are exposed to a more complex social relation than their peers. Besides their biological family, people involved in making decision concerning their welfare include social workers, carers and teachers. Each of these represents an independent institution with varied interests and goals. While they may claim to work for the best interest of their charge, their lack of collaboration and communication more often than not hurts the educational prospects of looked after children.

To redress the situation, many advocate greater cooperation between the social service and educational institutions (Bennathan 1992; Jackson 1994; Firth & Horrocks 1996; Borland 2000; etc). Indeed there was a breakthrough in the late 90s when the UK government decided to review the situation and push for inter-agency working (Flynn & Brodie 2000). Such collaboration works toward better communication and understanding of each other's roles in building consensus have to be reached before school stability and continuity, and the provision of education intervention and opportunities could be secured.

However, the joint-venture is not without challenges. At the outset, it must not remain an ideological aspiration but be translated into practical execution. It entails the setting up of a working committee to ensure communication between various parties. Teachers, social workers and carers need to meet on a regular basis to share information and draw up action plans. All these require strategic planning and commitment at all levels. The evaluations thus far have identified at least three obstacles: The increase of school autonomy makes inter-professional practice harder to achieve (Harker et al 2004); the small number of looked after children in some schools and none in others makes the effort to ensure all schools and teachers know how to respond to their educational needs a

big task (Hayden 2005) and finally, financial constraints may also undermine the effectiveness of the collaboration (Coulling 2000).

2.3.2 Improve Training

Since the lives of looked after children differ greatly from their peers, the 'normal' channels of support available to the larger population are inadequate to address their educational needs (Fletcher-Campbell 1998). Training is therefore necessary in order for the professionals to be aware of their own and each other's roles (Maclean & Gunion 2003). It will also help them gain an in-depth understanding of the situation. In particular, the education institution should equip its teachers with skills that lend appropriate support for looked after children. Without these skills, they could only resort to lower expectation or well-meant sympathy, and neither is good enough to help their students.

2.3.3 Improve School Attendance

The high rates of exclusion and school transfer have a detrimental effect on the lives of many looked after children and it requires special effort from the various agencies to keep these children in school and ensure regular attendance (Blyth 2001). Francis (2000) suggests setting policy for inclusion and continuity. Although the process may be knotty, the goal should not be passed over as stability and continuity have been identified as a key factor for education success (Jackson & Martin 1998).

2.3.4 Improve Care Planning

Unlike the American system whereby educational planning for each child coming into care was stipulated as a standard practice for residential centres (Child Welfare League of America 1982), the young people in UK see the failure to incorporate such planning in their care plan as a factor that contributes to their underachievement (Fletcher-Campbell 1998; Francis 2002). Many researchers have stressed the importance of developing a personalized educational plan for looked after child (Borland 2000; Flynn & Brodie 2000). Such a plan is to be supported by a detailed assessment of their educational needs

(Francis 2000) and extend beyond placement (Buchanan 1995). A greater involvement by the educational psychologists is believed to be an added value (McParlin 1996). Nonetheless, Maclean & Gunion (2003) draw attention to the peril of not reviewing the plan at specified intervals and not involving school staff in the process, while Hayden (2005) highlights the practical issues faced by social workers and teachers in putting the plan into practice. For instance, the same plan cannot be applied to all cases, teachers are already weighed down by their responsibilities, and social workers lack knowledge and confidence in educational issues.

2.3.5 Improve Care Facilities

The importance of physical environment and programme in children's development is beyond discussion. While children in residential care were reported to be those with more educational difficulties (Maclean & Gunion 2003), the need for improvement in care facilities is unquestionable (Bennathan 1992). Besides making rooms for study areas and reading resources, other conditions such as technology and leisure activities are equally important. The summary of Harket et al (2003:98) on the disadvantages of children in residential home includes "lower incidence of someone attending school events, access to a local library, or information about their educational rights and entitlements." A model of success can be found in the evaluation of Gallagher et al (2004) of a residential home where a 'learning culture' was fostered through much effort.

The improvement of care facilities should also take account of the need to develop children's resilience. Its features laid down by Grotberg (1995) include trusting relationships, emotional support outside the family, self-esteem, encouragement of autonomy, hope, responsible risk taking, a sense of being lovable, school achievement, belief in God and morality and unconditional love for someone. In a nutshell, children who are vulnerable to an adverse outcome yet achieve competence are "resilient" (Osborn 1990), a significant characteristic of the high achievers in Jackson & Martin's (1998) work. The resilience of looked after children, in Gilligan's (1999) view, can be greatly enhanced by encouraging the development of talents and interests. This again has much to do with the Home's priority and structure.

2.3.6 Encourage Research

Finally, further research is necessary if outcomes of looked after children are to be improved. No doubt a wealth of information has been produced over the past 15 years on the education of these children, there remains some unfilled gaps, for instance, the young people's perspectives of their educational experience (Goddard 2000; Flynn & Brodie 2000; Francis 2000), and the ways to measure and improve outcomes (Courtney 2000; Berridge 2002).

Understanding the impact of care upon education requires the first person account of young people who themselves know what works best in terms of supporting their education (Firth & Fletcher 2001). They are the ones who will be directly affected by any change of policy and they were said to have important and highly relevant things to say about the services they are receiving (Buchanan 1995).

Relevance to the study

Although recommendation for improvement is a step ahead of this study, the suggestions made help to delineate the standard of best practice. More specifically, they have spelt out what can be done to redress the problem of looked after children's low attainment and in some cases, whether the measures that have been implemented are reaping results as intended or otherwise. Many of the above pointers are believed to be absent in the local context except, perhaps for the emphasis on developing children's resilience. At least two pieces of local works (Wong 1997; Cherian & Tan 1999) were found to have advocated its value.

More importantly, this section supports the research on young people's perspectives. Regardless of what have been said about looked after children and their prevalent low attainment in education, readers are cautioned not to draw hasty conclusions of a correlation between the two elements (Goddard 2000; Jackson & Martin 1998). The point is: there is a greater need to understand their experiences and views. It is precisely the goal of this study as it seeks to provide a descriptive account of looked after children's school experience from their own perspectives.

2.4 Conclusion

Much of the literature reviewed in this chapter points to the fact that looked after children should not be further disadvantaged by the welfare system. The 'corporate parents' do have the responsibility to bring about a positive change in their educational experience and such calling could only be achieved if those who care are acting on their behalf (Walker 1994). An overview of the education of looked after children is therefore presented to ensure the various issues surrounding the topic are being understood. They are significant references for the design of the research as well as data analysis.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 The Philosophy of Approach

3.1.1 Setting Goals

According to Neuman and Kreuger (2003:21), the purposes of social research may be organized into three categories: explore a new topic, describe a social phenomenon, or explain why something occurs. In working out the methodology for the study of the education of looked after children, each of the categories mentioned by Neuman and Kreuger was carefully weighed as follows:

Exploration: This refers to an investigation of a new topic about which little has been written. In a sense, this was the case with the topic in question. As pointed out, Singapore has been almost devoid of any academic investigation concerning the education of looked after children. Although foreign works have provided us an array of theoretical bases, they cannot be applied to the local situation without the consideration of contextual differences; variations in a society in terms of culture, system, setting and functions duly challenge the credibility of an indiscriminate transference of knowledge. Under such circumstances, the topic considered is new in terms of its framework and the research is, in effect, exploratory.

Description: Considering the fact that 'all research is, to some extent, descriptive' (LeCompt & Preissle 1993:31), descriptive research, however, is to be understood as a work that aims to provide a clear picture of a phenomenon. Perhaps because of their small number, looked after children have long escaped the attention of local educational scholars and policy makers. Consequently, there is a gap in the knowledge of their experience in schools, not to mention educational needs. It is a gap that needs to be filled; after all, these children carry with them a distinct social makeup that constitutes a phenomenon in the mainstream schools. The first step forward, thus, would be to develop a fuller understanding of the phenomenon and so description is a justified purpose of this study.

Explanation: The goal of explanatory research is to establish causes or reasons for a phenomenon. A good deal of research done on the education of looked after children in the western world is evidently driven by the prevalent underachievement of these children. Their focus has largely been set on the possible causes of the distressing reality, so as to promote school progress, which in turn is believed to be able to improve life chances. Such were laudable goals as they would ultimately benefit the looked after children. Nevertheless, finding the causal link between looked after and low achievement requires the availability of other exploratory and descriptive research to build on, and an adequate sample size to satisfy the validity demand. In the context of the present study, because of its intrinsic challenges and costs, explanatory research was therefore deemed not viable.

To conclude, the study is considered descriptive although it is exploratory in nature. Such nature entailed some kind of data collection in the initial stage as the basis for the design and execution of a more systematic study (Neuman and Kreuger 2003:21). On the other hand, the explanatory goal was relinquished even though explanatory knowledge is often thought to be more powerful than descriptive knowledge (Punch 1998). This is reasonable since a thorough descriptive study would be more appropriate and could produce valuable results. With this descriptive focus, the basis of approach was resolved through careful deliberation of the choice of investigation framework.

3.1.2 Framing the Paradigm

Much has been written about the conflicting views of the two research positions, positivist and anti-positivist, with the positivist having a long history stemming from the study of natural law and the anti-positivist confronting its rightful application in social science. Both have their profound influence on social research (von Wright 1993). While an evaluation of the two traditions is impossible due to limited space, a brief account will help us understand what they stood for.

Positivism suggests objectivity, universal law, and logical explanation. Objectivity because reality is out there and social scientists are to take on the role of an observer.

The ultimate goal is to discover some causal link, which could be expressed as a law for the purpose of generalization. Hence, it emphasises explicability in term of measurability, and the data involved are often numerical.

Anti-positivism comes in many forms. At its core, it proposes that the study of the social world ought to differ from the study of the natural world as human beings are self-conscious, complex and creative subjects rather than unconscious, static and mechanical objects. Moreover, 'truth' is in the mind of the knower. Subjectivity is advocated in place of objectivity and so one has to take an interpretive stance in order to understand individuals' thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Thus, it is also called interpretivism. The data comprises of discourse, records and documents.

Being critical of the meaningfulness of the positivist and anti-positivist positions, a third paradigm emerged and it is appropriately called critical theory. Its intention is not to provide an account of society and behaviour but to push for equality and democracy for all its members (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000). It is interpretive and descriptive, yet the ultimate concern is how the situation could be improved. Hence, an accurate assessment of the current situation is necessary, as it is to be followed by a proposal of actions to be taken. For this reason, both statistical data and documentations are to be used to produce a full picture of the state of affairs.

All in all, these positions represent the worldviews concerning what makes research scientific. In the course of social research, a position is often adopted on the premise of one's ideology, or even conventional practice. Then again, the choice can also be dictated by the goal of the study. Explanatory research is generally a positivistic stance as it attempts to verify objective causality. On the other hand, descriptive research is linked to anti-positivism/interpretivism since its purpose is to look deeper into human perspectives and provide an ideographic account of the phenomenon. While it may be overstretch to associate exploratory with critical theory, the third paradigm distinguishes itself mainly by the interpretation of the findings rather than the mode of inquiry. In the words of Ruben & Babbie (1997:41), its researchers 'set out to interpret findings through the filter of their empowerment and advocacy aims' and attempt 'to connect their observations to

their a priori notion of an unjust, broader objective reality that they are seeking to change'.

From what had been said, it was clear that the descriptive study had its roots planted in anti-positivism/interpretivism. This led to the next question on the mode of inquiry: does the approach of the study have to be qualitative. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994:3), qualitative research is a set of interpretive practices. Creswell (1994:21) has also associated such practices with the exploratory framework:

> *One of the chief reasons for conducting a qualitative study is that the study is exploratory; not much has been written about the topic or population being studies, and the researcher seeks to listen to informants and to build a picture based on their ideas.*

A qualitative approach was thus a logical decision for the study. Having said so, care has to be taken that one mode of inquiry does not represent a specific position. Gliner (1994:80), in making clear that the distinction between positivism and anti-positivism/interpretivism lies mainly in the nature of reality, not mode of inquiry says, "it can be argued that not all qualitative research is naturalistic *(interpretivistic)*, or all quantitative research positivistic." Though different in many ways, the quantitative and qualitative approaches are not mutually exclusive. As a matter of fact, scientists have begun to recognize the value of combining the two as they have found out that these approaches can complement each other when used appropriately, (Miles & Huberman 1994; Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000; Neuman and Kreuger 2003). Hence, an interpretive research need not restrict itself with only qualitative tools. Numerical facts can be useful data for a qualitative study. The point is to apply the right tool for the right purpose. To clarify the approach, various models commonly use for investigation were assessed for their suitability.

3.1.3 Modelling the Approach

So far, decisions had been made that the study was to be exploratory and descriptive; although its position was anchored in interpretivism, both quantitative and qualitative tools were to be used so long as they would help answer the research questions (*see*

1.3.1). In contemplating a more specific approach, three possible models were examined as follows:

Statistical Survey

Conduct surveys of looked after children concerning their overall school performances and ideas of possible causes. It is a fitting model of an explanatory research. Since only numerical data will be collected, the sample size has to be large enough in order to attain validity and generalizability of the findings. The advantage is that we will not only learn about their achievement level, but also possible causes for the outcome.

Success of the model relies on two criteria: first, questions are well framed and second, the researcher is allowed access to most if not all Homes. Conversely, its drawbacks will be that findings are restricted by the researcher's preconception of public care cum inability to reflect on the personal views of informants. An approach that is more likely to be used by the positivists, it is said to have lacked 'notions of choice, freedom, individuality, and moral responsibility' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000:17).

Experimental

Compare looked after children's school experience with other non-looked after children. Having a control group will help rule out factors that do not pertain to being looked after. While learning about the similarities and differences between the two groups of children in schools, we may gain a deeper understanding of the impact of public care on children's experience and progress. Like statistical survey, the approach helps to establish some sort of explanations for the phenomenon.

The problem with this model is finding a group of matching children to form a control group for the experiment. The selection process can be tricky as the looked after children differ in many aspects, such as reason for placement, length of stay, number of school transfer, etc. These are potential factors that will influence the results and in turn undermine any causal explanation. Besides practicality, there is also the question of justice. Given that the study is all about the education of looked after children, the non-

looked after participants obviously will have nothing to gain from the research. By enlisting their help, the researcher has in actual fact violated the ethical standards of educational research, namely beneficence and justice (CRPP 2003).

Ethnography:

Without any preconceived theories, identify a group of looked after children, scattered or confined in a setting, immerse in their midst and find out about their school related concerns. Data are usually gathered from a range of sources, for example observation, interviews and document analysis (Hammersley 1998:2). Ultimately, participants' explanations of their experience rather than researcher's scientific explanations of the data are to be sought. Thus, data are meticulously studied to ensure accurate representation. As LeCompte and Preissle (1993) have put it, it is a search for 'reality', as such multiple perceptions are incorporated.

In the case of a confined setting, access to conduct an ethnographic research is only required from one institution and the study is bounded by time, space and activity. While a researcher's participation is significant as it is the basis for data collection, criticism is often directed against the researcher's involvement in the data and the way it would be interpreted. Although it is advisable for the ethnographer to start his/her investigation judgement-free, it is questionable that anyone could walk into a setting without any views. Consequently, not only that the validity of an ethnographic research is challenged, the findings are also not meant to be generalized.

From the above assessment, each model appeared to have its pros and cons, except that the last was the only one that had an interpretive tradition. To be circumspect, the criteria for the selection of a model were extended to practical considerations of the study:

Current research: The availability of current research is likely to affect the direction of a study, as it provides the foundation for further works to build on. In view of the lack of research on the education of looked after children in the local context, it was thought to be more fitting if the study did not start with a hypothesis in the absence of valuable resources. Instead, it should seek to explore and understand the context better.

Time and cost: Time and cost can be determining factors for the choice of research work. Without funding, a researcher will not be able to accomplish something extensive in size or lengthy in time. The study in question was a work for a degree course. Time and cost were significant factors for the researcher and so a case study was perhaps a more prudent choice.

Field experience: Having no professional experience or association in the social service sector and primary schools, the researcher's accessibility to these institutions would be limited. This explained why the first two models, statistical survey and experimental, were thought to be unfitting as access played an important role in their success.

Focus of the study: As mentioned in the first chapter, the study was about looked after children's perspectives of their experience in schools. Besides the prerequisite of a large sample size, statistical surveys by questionnaire suffer from the simplification and pre-determined questions as it is difficult for questionnaires to be flexible and exploratory. Thus, the model is incompatible with the focus. As for experimental, where comparisons are made between two groups of children (looked after and non-looked after), it too falls short of executing an in-depth examination of the subjects' views, and usually tends to treat them as 'subjects' who are given certain 'treatments' to see if explanations can be identified. In the end, ethnography appears to be the model closest to the focus of the study, as its primary concern is to reflect the participants' point of view. Nonetheless, the model is not without problems especially in its execution as the researcher is required to be at the site for observation. The approach also raises the questions of validity and generalizability.

In view of the above deliberations, it is decided that a mixed method approach may be more appropriate for the study since none of the above models could be adopted without some modifications. With this, we have come to the final consideration of the philosophical underpinnings of the methodology and that it is to address the issues of validity and generalizability.

3.1.4 Ensuring Validity and Generalizability

All research eventually is required to meet a set of criteria put in place to ensure the standard of practice. Criteria for quantitative research have long reached consensus and are defined as internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity. Criteria for qualitative research, however, were thought to be more elusive as varied recommendations had been raised (Hammersley 1998:58). The most eminent proposition comes from Lincoln and Guba's 1985 works, as they suggest that the issue of rigor could be addressed by 'trustworthiness' (Gliner 1994:84). There are four criteria for 'trustworthiness' and each was meant to take the place of a quantitative criterion, as listed above, in a qualitative work. They are called credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

To address the validity question, Mertens (1998) has offered multiple ways in meeting the criteria suggested by Guba and Lincoln. The application, however, depends not only on their feasibility but also significance in respect to the study. Reference was also made to other sources and in the end, three methods were selected to provide the proactive measures for the study. The following gives its explanation:

Triangulation

Triangulation is one of the most commonly used methods of establishing validity. According to Gliner (1994:84), 'The idea behind triangulation is to establish different patterns of agreement based on more than one method, observer, or data source.' Thus, data could be collected from different sources (triangulation of data), or it could come from both qualitative and quantitative methods (triangulation of methods). The multi-method approach allows one source of data to be verified by another. Ultimately, when there is a convergence, conclusion can be safely made as accuracy is enhanced.

Another advantage of triangulation is that it 'also provides a means to elicit data that may otherwise be overlooked' (Huettman 1993:42). Important data that are not found in one source may show up in another. The multi-method approach thus enriches the findings by incorporating a wider source of information and variables.

Hence, it is not uncommon for researchers to use many kinds of data collection techniques, both qualitative and quantitative, to ascertain the various representations of a phenomenon (LeCompt & Preissle 1993; Gordon et al 2001). They include unstructured interviews, participant or non-participant observation, field notes, study of documents and statistical survey.

A word of caution, however, is that applying more methods does not necessarily lead to validity. What is more important is having the right tools to match the research questions. Kerlinger (1986:417) contends, 'The commonest definition of validity is epitomized by the question: Are we measuring what we think we are measuring? The emphasis in this question is on *what is* being measure.' Hence, the research questions remain to be the guiding principles for the choice of methodology for data collection.

Respondents' validation

While collecting data directly from informants is a common practice of a researcher, interpreting these data accurately is often a knotty process. One way to ensure truthful representation is the use of respondents' validation. Woods (1999:4) reasons, 'If our aim is to understand the meanings and perspectives of others, how else to test how faithfully we have represented them than with the people concerned themselves?' Hence, it is recommended that informants be given the opportunity to check the transcription of their interviews, the interpretation of the researcher and/or the conclusion drawn from the data.

A tool comparable to *member checks* as mentioned in Merten's (1998) list, respondents' validation was viewed as 'the most important criterion in establishing credibility' (182). However, in the case of children with limited reading ability, respondents' validation may appear to be challenging, if not impossible. Thomas & O'kane (1998:345) presents four possible ways to overcome the barrier: (a) allowing children to talk freely on the subjects they choose; (b) to revisit each child to allow them another opportunity to review and refine their statements; (c) have a group of children reinterpret the research questions collectively and (d) form a group of children volunteers to produce an audiotape of children's comments from the research. The ultimate goal of these suggestions is to include those children, who are the principal informants, in the analysis of the data.

Reflexivity

The researcher's element is an important consideration in any research especially when the process is largely marked by social interaction and personal judgement. In other words, such intense involvement intertwines the researcher with his/her data. Reflexivity is thus required in order that its effect could be clearly demarcated in the findings.

The researcher's element apparently does not only prevail in ethnography. Atkinson (2001) aptly states that no one could react to 'facts' as they 'really are' but to their consciousness of them and that consciousness is interpretive and experiential. Hence, we should all be mindful of the part our personal constitution plays in our research work, irrespective of its kind. On a similar note, Mills (1959) advocates for the use of our life experiences in examining and interpreting data. Reflexivity is therefore not only a tool for verification but also enhancement.

According to Hammersley (1984), there are at least three implications in the use of reflexivity. First, the researcher is placed on par with his/her respondents, and so his/her goals, ideas and actions, like those of his/her respondents, are also under scrutiny. Secondly, the researcher is required to be aware of his/her decision and motives, and lastly, the researcher's actions are to be incorporated in his/her report.

In researching children, the distinct status of an adult researcher raises the question of the researcher's role. Since the researcher 'can always revert to their adult role, by choice or by circumstance' (James 2001:253), power differential will take place when the two parties interact. On the other hand, Punch (2002) argues that reflexivity is not only necessary in the area of researcher's role and assumptions, but also the choice of methods and their application. The recommendation is meant to moderate the potential pitfalls of researching children due to adult perceptions and children's marginal social standing.

On top of validity, another challenge to a case study research has to do with the generalization of findings. It is known as transferability in Guba and Lincoln's term, in which readers are to 'determine the degree of similarity between the study site and the

receiving context' (Merten 1998:183). An effective way to build the bridge across is to resort to 'thick description' (*ibid.*, Gliner 1994, Hammerseley 1998), whereby extensive information of the context as well as the development of the research is incorporated in the writing so as to allow readers a fuller understanding of the study. Part of the requirement is to apply reflexivity as expounded above. On the other hand, Woods (1985:56) believes generation and formulation of theory have often been neglected by ethnographers in their attempt to embrace validity and has advocated for theoretical sensitivity in the research. To avoid making the same mistake, Hammersley's (1998:11) recommendation of 'documenting processes occurring over time, and/or by means of comparative analysis of cases' is thought to be helpful. Therefore, sensitivity over time and towards people was part of the methodology towards a sound research.

Sensitivity over Time: A problem with ethnographic research, as Woods (1985:54) has pointed out, is that it captures only a limited time period and few ethnographers have taken the past and future into consideration to any extent. Nevertheless, having a time frame is not only inevitable but also necessary in a case study as it provides the needed parameter for the analysis of data, and helps to solidify the basis of the findings. Its drawbacks are therefore to be moderated by sensible solutions such as researcher's sensitivity over the timing and periods of data collection, and the incorporation of documentation analysis, etc.

Sensitivity over Selection: While qualitative researchers work mainly with a group of people nested in their context (Miles & Huberman 1994), selection becomes a crucial process and stretches from people to settings and situations. Moreover, such selection is not likely to be one-off but a recursive activity (LeCompte & Preissle 1993) so long as new queries emerge and new informants are required.

To address the issue of transferability, it is recommended that a researcher adopts purposeful selection and provides thick description, a concept first recommended by Geertze (1975) in his book on the interpretation of cultures. Purposeful selection is necessary because, in the opinion of Creswell (1998:118), 'researchers designing qualitative studies need clear criteria in mind and need to provide rationales for their decisions.' In other words, when selection is well defined and coupled with thick

description, it makes the identification of similarity between study site and the receiving context easier for readers.

We have now come to the end of the various philosophical considerations of the methodology for this study. Due to limited space, the presentation was not meant to be exhaustive but aimed at demonstrating the critical aspects that had influenced the subsequent research design.

3.2 Research Design

The research design spells out the researcher's intentions and plans of how the research is to be executed. Besides philosophical underpinnings, it is also guided by research questions and the availability of resources. The section comprises various processes of selection, such as setting, participants, researcher's role and instruments, as well as the ethical standard for this study.

3.2.1 Setting and Participants

Basically, boundaries for the setting, participants and focus of the study were set when the topic was identified. As it concerns looked after children, the selection lies in whether to locate them in the institutions such as children's Homes or foster families. While foster families were scattered and difficult to locate, the children's Homes appeared to be an ideal bounded place for the study. Hence, the decision was made that the research would be carried out in one of the children's Homes in Singapore.

On the other hand, education was the prime concern of this study and, as concluded in the literature review, the focus would be on children's perspectives of their school experience. Consequently, primary school children were chosen to be studied as an attempt to further narrow the definition of looked after children to a group that shared common educational exposure. In other words, those who were in the preschools, schools for children with special needs and secondary schools, though living under the

same shelter, would not be asked to participate in the research as their schools' environment and expectations were likely to be different.

3.2.2 Researcher's Role

Keeping in mind the power differential between researcher and children informants, the next crucial decision was to find an appropriate researcher role during data collection. For observation, this role could be anything from covert to overt participation or non-participation. While there were ethical questions concerning covert observation (Boyle 1999), an overt presence, whether in the form of participation or non-participation, would have an inevitable influence on children, as well as the findings. To minimize such impact, observation, a significant component of data collection in ethnographic research, was ruled out and replaced by other mechanisms.

In the course of data collection, my identity was not intended to be concealed from the children and they would be told of the purpose of my visits. Moreover, the authoritative role was to be avoided in order that rapport could be built with the informants. It starts with how I would be addressed by the children. As the lives of looked after children were often marked by a myriad of decision makers—parents, teachers, law enforcers, public carers and social workers, etc, there was no lack of authoritative figures in their lives. Nevertheless, these children were also exposed to volunteers whom they could address by names or auntie, uncle. Although I was not a volunteer, to appear in a similar manner would likely be acceptable, if not welcomed, by these children.

3.2.3 Instruments

As mentioned, the study would adopt the *triangulation of method* approach to ensure validity. Four instruments were carefully selected to answer the research questions (*see 1.3.1*). Observation was not one of them. The decision to omit the core instrument of ethnography was based on the potential influence the researcher would bring to the data, especially when the community consists mainly of minors. As substitutes, demographic study and documentations would be used for the purpose of providing contextual

information. Conversely, children's perspectives were to be captured through interviews and questionnaires.

Statistics

Without prior knowledge of the site, the researcher had to do some groundwork before approaching children for information. It involved talking to the gatekeeper to gain an overview of the Home and collecting statistical data that concern its demography. The course of action corresponded with Powney and Watts' (1987) recommendation of 'methodology congruence', which was to be achieved by two perspectives: the first-order perspective focuses upon matter-of-fact data and second-order perspective, one's experience.

The matter-of-fact data in this case referred specifically to profiles of children in the Home. A standard form (*see Appendix 2*) was designed for the recording of each child's personal details, placement information and school particulars, such as attendance, academic performance and conduct. Information was available in the children's records filed by the Home and direct contact with children was not necessary. Ultimately, the instrument would provide collated numerical data, which was reckoned as essential background knowledge for the interviews to be conducted in the next phase.

Document analysis

Another technique that provided important information of the Home. While it focused on elaborating the setting, it was to contribute mainly to having 'thick description' for the purpose of generalizability. In other words, it was not meant to serve as the basis for the interview but to confer a fuller illustration to the analysis.

It required the collection of printed documents such as structure of physical and administrative organization, annual reports, residential publications, rules and regulations, children's timetables and programmes, etc. These documents were crucial if the contextual environment of the children was to be understood, especially in the

absence of observation. As Woods (1986:94) proposes, "documents can help reconstruct events, and give information about social relationship."

Interviews

Interviewing children has not been a common practice in research. Often times, adults were asked to give their views even when the issue concerns children. Scott (2000) has offered four reasons for the bias. They are briefly stated here as: inertia of practice, greater faith in adults' ability, problems with practical and ethical issues, and hesitation over children's competency (communication, cognitive, and social skills). Conversely, there are those who advocate children's voices and believe children can provide valid accounts of their own experiences and perspectives (Mahon & Glendinning 1996; Hill et al 1996). The advancement of children's rights and developmental theory has also encouraged the inclusion of children's views, especially in things that concern their welfare (Thomas & O'Kane 2000).

Since understanding children's perspectives was the focus of this study, hearing what they have to say about their experiences would follow the analysis of their profiles. Interviewing children requires thorough preparation. In this section, we will consider three important components of the interviews: its questions, participants and structure.

a. Questions for the Interviews

The objectives of the interview schedule (see *Appendix 4*) was to answer the first two research questions for this study:

1) *What have the children experienced in school?*
2) *How do they feel about these experiences?*

School related themes that might have an impact on looked after children's academic performance were identified through literature concerning children's school experience. Six had been found and they were the children's perspectives of: school, relationship with teachers, relationship with peers, motivation in learning, practical

help in the Home and ideas of their future career. They were subsequently used to guide the formulation of the interview schedule.

'Completely scheduled interview'—where specific questions will be asked in a fixed sequence using specific words (Gorden 1980)—was adopted to ascertain reliability and the collection of relevant information. Nonetheless, questions were intended to be neutral and open-ended in order to allow children the freedom to speak their mind.

Some of the questions involved children's self-perception (e.g. '*Do you think your teacher likes you?*') as it was believed to have an influence on a child's relationship with another person. In fact, the suggestion that children around the age of 9 or 10 are beginning to develop the ability to engage in recursive thought (Dillard & Reilly 1988) qualifies many of the interviewees for handling such questions.

Finally, visual aids were employed as Cohen et al (2000) believe they could help children answer complex questions. A series of stimuli (*see Appendix 5*) via computer graphic were designed to be presented during the interviews. They were vignettes that depict school lives according to the themes (school, teachers, classmates, lesson time and homework).

b. Participants in the Interviews

To begin with, only P2 to 6 children would be selected for the interviews as the P1 children were in Kindergarten the year before and would still be new to the primary school environment. Each class level would have four representatives, 2 girls and 2 boys, and they would add up to about half the population of the Home in question. Formal consent (*see Appendix 3*) was necessary from the selected participants before interviews could be conducted.

In order that all subgroups were represented, purposeful sampling was applied. To enhance analysis, a range of similar and contrasting cases were selected (Miles & Huberman 1994). Hence, besides having participants representing different gender

and class levels, the following criteria were also employed except that an equal number of representations was not required:

1. Race (Chinese/Indians)
2. Academic Performance in Examination-Oct 2003 (Passed/Failed)
3. Length of Stay in the Home (Below 3 years/Above 3 years)
4. Number of Placement (One/Two or Three)
5. School Transfer (Yes/No)

It has been found that children are most comfortable in group setting as it is more natural and has the ability to 'minimize the power differential between the researcher and those being studied' (Eder & Fingerson 2002:183). As a stranger to the children, the researcher is likely to cause fear and hesitation in some of her interviewees. Allowing companions was believed to be able to distract the children's attention from the researcher and encourage greater participation. Therefore, peer group interviews would be used in this research, but the group size would be kept at two in order to prevent potential problems in recording and management. The length of each interview was planned to be not more than half an hour bearing in mind the fatigue factor.

c. Structure of the Interviews

This includes the venue and technical arrangements for the interviews. While our society is dominated by adult spaces (Punch 2002), it may not be easy to find a perfect place for the interviews. Certain restrictions and criteria were considered in the search. First, they have to be conducted in the residential Home due to the children's status. A room that offers privacy and a certain amount of serenity is of prime concern for recording purpose. Finally, it would be an added value if it does not project an authoritative mood.

Since the interviewees were primary school children, a voice recorder was believed to be less threatening than a video camera. However, voice recorder was limited in capturing the whole interviewing process, so pen and paper for note taking was

prepared as a backup. The paper format for note taking was adapted from Creswell's (1998) Interview Protocol for its simple and straightforward presentation. The protocol for the interviews includes the interview schedule (*see Appendix 4*).

A laptop would be brought in for the presentation of graphic stimulus. As local children were widely exposed to computers, the use of computer visual aids was believed to be able to ease tension and encourage participation.

Questionnaire Survey

It has been said that "If you asked open-ended questions, follow up particular topics in a second interview, and give the interviewee the opportunity to comment on your interpretation of the answers, you are likely to obtain some rich, original data" (Travers 2001, p.3). Getting children to comment on the interpretations of the interviews, however, would not be easy due to their young age and short attention span. Hence, a questionnaire survey was chosen to achieve a two-fold purpose: to provide for respondents' validation (in this case, by a larger population) as well as allowing the researcher another opportunity to probe further into their perspectives of school. Therefore, besides having important findings from the interviews and document analysis reformulated as survey questions, a survey conducted by *The Who Care? Trust* (Shaw 1998) was also consulted for its format and general approach in the formulation of a questionnaire (*see Appendix 6*). Details of the participants and structure of the survey are as follows:

a. Participants in the Survey

All 41 primary school children who were at the Home were invited to participate in the questionnaire survey. In this case, some of the former interviewees would have a chance to respond to the conclusions drawn from the interviews by giving their answers a second time. Including all primary school children in the survey also has other added advantages. Not only all views from the population of the case study Home could be consulted, the administrative problems which arose from children's sudden restoration to their natural families could also be minimized.

A consent form was not used in this survey but children would be told of the purpose and process of its administration prior to the survey. They could decide for themselves whether to participate or opt out. Finally, in contrast to the interviews where participants were interviewed in pairs, the survey was to be conducted with one respondent at a time so as to weed out peers' influence.

b. Structure and administration of the Survey

An important lesson gained from the interviews conducted earlier was that children have a limited concentration span when they were drawn into a question and answer session with an adult. In order to sustain interest, the survey ought to be done differently. Thus, a prime concern in the design was to make the process more interesting to the young respondents. On top of it, time and number of questions were also factors to be considered.

Eventually, a *see and tell* approach was favoured over the conventional *pen and paper* approach in a questionnaire. As a result, questions were printed on vanguard sheets (*see Appendix 7*), each in its specific format, to be brought to the site. Answers would have to be recorded on paper but it was the job of the interviewer. Consequently, a face-to-face interviewer-administered approach had to be used. Such approach have other advantages as the interviewer is allowed to make any clarification as required, record any ambiguity or flaws spotted in the questions, and build rapport with respondents.

With respect to the duration of each survey session, it was decided that it should not exceed 15 minutes and because of time constraint, the number of questions was fixed at 12. On the other hand, Demographic-objective information (Adams & Schranereldt 1985) was kept to the basic. Each participant's name was replaced by a code number to ensure anonymity and confidentiality; only factual information concerning their gender, race, class level and any experience with school transfer was collected for the sake of analysis.

The twelve questions (*see Appendix 6*) were framed in one of the four models illustrated below. They were designed to match the types of information to be gathered and in consideration of what would appeal to children. Adams & Schranereldt's (1985) style and type of questions were also consulted for ideas on the design.

1) Sticky Choice (Cafeteria-style)

   The model applies to questions that have many choices to choose from. Instead of having the participants put a check to the items that apply to them, their job was to name those items on the vanguard sheet to the interviewer. Moreover, a card with a question mark printed on it would also be displayed so that participants could feel free to add in other items.

2) Peg the Scale (Likert-type)

   This template is suitable for questions that aim at measuring the degree of intensity. In this case, a line marked by 5 levels of agreement would be shown to the participants. All they needed to do was to move the peg to the level that agreed with their answer.

3) Mix-n-Match

   The model was used only once for participants to match the people in their lives with the decisions they made concerning school matters. Two sets of cards were prepared; one features different figures, such as parents, social workers, etc and the other, school matters. When an item of school matter was shown to the participants, they were told to match it with its decision makers.

4) Unfinished sentence

   This was a more open-ended model. The participants were helped to express their thoughts by being required to continue and complete an unfinished sentence. The model appeared only in the last three questions of the survey.

3.2.4 Ethical Issues

A major concern of every research is its compliance with the ethical standard, which is put in place to protect the interests of the subjects. When the subjects involve children, risk factors increase due to their vulnerability, and more so if they belong to a group that single them out from the others (Greig & Taylor 1999). In the design of the research in question, the following ethical principles, adapted from Kent's (2000) list, were enforced:

Informed Consent

Permission was first sought from the gatekeeper of a Children's Home. A proposal containing purposes and procedure of the research was provided. Upon agreement, a letter (*see Appendix 1*) was written to the director, who was also the 'fit person' according to our Children and Young Persons Act (chapter 38, revised edition 2001, page 7), to confirm the research. [*A 'fit person' is a person whom the court or the protector, having regard to the character of the person, thinks competent to provide care, protection and supervision of a child or young person.*]

On the other hand, respect for the autonomy of all individuals leads to the requirement of informed consent from children. During the interviews, children were not only furnished with the facts of the interviews, given opportunity to ask questions, but also presented with a consent form to indicate whether they wished to participate in the activity. As for the questionnaire survey, though without the consent form, children were also told of the purpose of the survey and given the choice to opt out.

The question of parent's consent was considered in the light of competing views on this subject. The decision to exclude parents' involvement was supported by the nature of the study and advice of the director. As mentioned, the focus of the study was on children's perspectives of school under the circumstance of Home placement. In the effort to ensure information would not be released on any individual children, consent from the authority of the Home alone was perceived as a justified act (Lewis & Lindsay 2002: 18).

Beneficence/Non-maleficence

Although it would be hard to claim direct benefits for the participants, the research's aim in filling the literature gap concerning the education of looked after children would eventually end up benefiting children of similar background. This also explains why a control group was ruled out (*see 3.1.3b*) since the research has nothing to offer to non-looked after children. Meanwhile, care would be taken that the research procedures would not inflict harm on the participants or expose them to unnecessary risks (Kent 2000).

Justice

While purposeful sampling was applied in the interviews, children were selected on the ground of the characteristics they bore to represent certain subgroups. The approach was believed to have value in the task of analysis, which would result in strengthening transferability of the findings (*see 3.1.4e*). In other words, none of the children were excluded by unjustified reasons.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Care was taken that names of the Home and children were not revealed in the writing. If need be, pseudonyms would be provided. In the survey of the Home's demography, code numbers were adopted in place of proper names for easy identification. The same was applied to the questionnaire survey.

Whilst interviews were tape recorded, the Home's management or school authorities would not have any access to them. The researcher was the only person who got to hear and transcribe the tapes, and pseudonyms were used in the transcriptions. Information provided by the participants would not be disclosed with their names to the authorities. However, should any information call for adults' attention, the participant would be informed before action is taken to disclose the information (Mahon & Glendinning 1996).

As soon as the tapes were not needed in the research process, they would be destroyed.

Fidelity

Should there be any changes with regard to the research procedure, the Home's management would be informed. If the Home or the participants wish to take a look at the transcripts, they will be allowed to do so. Upon the completion of the study, a copy of the manuscript would be submitted to the Home's management.

3.3 Procedure of Data Collection

3.3.1 Access

The selection of a research site went on for a few months. On the whole, I have approached three children's Homes and finally decided on one based on the convenience of its location and supportive leadership. My first visit to this Home took place in February 2003. Armed with only a faint notion of what I was going to do, I met up with the director, who was also the gatekeeper, and explained my intention. It was found that the Home had in fact accommodated a number of research requests and was no stranger to research procedure. The second visit did not materialize until ten months later. By then I was in the process of producing a research proposal and was able to discuss some of the details with the director. The meeting was followed by a six-page proposal, which was faxed to the director upon completion. The move was to avoid ill-informed consent, which could be costly to the quality of the research (Murphy et al 1992). When the green light was given, an official letter (*see Appendix 1*) was written in February 2004 to thank the director for his permission to conduct the research at the Home.

3.3.2 Phase One: Statistical Data

In the design of a form for a child's profile (*see Appendix 2*), reference was made to the MCDS's application form for Per Capita Grant For Children's Home and the section on Reasons for Admission was replicated. This section encompasses the channel of admission (referral). On top of placement information, the form also contains children's academic data. However, there was a design problem in the section of School Performance, 5 instead of 4 tables should be provided since the maximum number of

previous years' records is 5 (*6 years in primary school*). Besides, each table needs only to display one class level.

These forms were printed and passed to the director who had offered to help fill up the personal and placement particulars of the children since he knew them at his fingertips. In the case of reason for placement, he was instructed to tick only the main reason despite the fact that these children often come with more than one predicament. The rationale for such decision was to allow the main reason to show up in the data.

Information concerning children's school performance and conduct could be found on their school report cards. It was the practice of the Home to photocopy and file these records before returning them to schools. I was given the permission to spend a few days looking through the records and extract information from them. Although the paper work was carried out at the Home, there was little contact with the children as most of them were in schools and I was isolated in a room.

There were some missing records due mainly to negligence. Since report cards are under school's custody, they can only be obtained at the end of each term when the report of current term results is being returned to the child for parent/guardian's acknowledgement. Given that different schools have different timing for this practice, not all records were captured.

Information on school transfer was another elusive item. When past year records were incomplete, it could be either the result of negligence (in photocopying/filing) or there was a change of school whereby old records were not produced by the child. A name list was given to the director to pin down the actual cause for the missing records.

3.3.3 Phase Two: Interviews

One of the conclusions drawn from the preliminary survey was that the majority of the children in the residential Home were underachievers. Although it was a phenomenon similar to that of the western world, whether the factors found in the literature review also

applied to the local context had yet to be determined. The interviews play an important role in the investigation.

After the model of the interview was conceived, some preparations took place before its actual execution. On technical part, a graphic designer was engaged to produce computer graphics for the vignettes (*see Appendix 5*); and there was a search for a suitable voice recorder in the market. For administration, arrangements were made with the director regarding schedule, setting and participants of the interviews, documents such as consent form and interview protocol were printed beforehand and even interviewer's introduction had to be deliberated. In addition, packets of tokens that contained chocolate cookies and a pen were prepared for the participants, even for those who participated in the pilot studies.

Pilot Studies

Pilot studies were conducted to test out whether the questions were in tune with local children's lingo or age appropriate. It is also important that they meant the same thing for both the interviewer and interviewees. Although children in the pilot studies were not looked after by public carer, they were students of the mainstream schools and would have shared the vernacular. The first round of pilot studies involved mainly acquaintances. There were two boys, one in P5 and another P2 and two sisters, one in P3 and another P5. The girls did it together.

Observations from the pilot studies were used to modify the interview schedule. Some of the questions were rephrased to ensure clarity. For example, the question *Are there people who show interest in your studies* was changed to *Are there people who care about your studies*. Additional questions were also inserted to encourage children to give accounts of what they thought.

To test out if the amendments were constructive, one last pilot study was conducted with a Primary 4 girl who was not an acquaintance. The girl understood all the questions and was able to provide adequate answers for each of them. On this note, the interview schedule was finalized.

Apart from the assessment of questions, the pilot studies have also helped to uncover some structural deficiencies of the process so that counter measures could be introduced. For instance, it was discovered that having two interviewees at the same time might add dynamic to the process when cross conversation and peer elucidation took place. It could also create confusion for recording, especially in the case of overlapping responses. To ensure clarity, it was decided that the interviewer should name the interviewee for every question posed.

Time and timing

The interviews were conducted from 18 to 27 May 2004. This was the period of time when the first semester examination had just ended and the four weeks' vacation was about to start. During the vacation, a majority of the children would return to their families, which explains why I, as the interviewer, had to push for its completion.

The interviews were largely done in the afternoon since most of the children would be in school in the morning. Only one selected participant would have to be in school in the afternoon and the interview with her and her peer was arranged in the evening.

Setting

When a room was negotiated for the interviews, it was highlighted to the director it should be characterized by low noise level, not accessible to intruders and cosy for children. During the period of the interviews, the Home was undergoing rebuilding for the purpose of expansion. Some premises were torn down and a temporary structure, which comprised a canteen and two meeting rooms, was erected. The room next to the canteen was used for the interviews. With an area of about 300 square foot, the room was air-conditioned but not furnished. Nonetheless, folding chairs and sockets were available. During the interview, the laptop was placed on one chair with the interviewees and the interviewer sitting in a semi-circle to get a full view (*see Appendix 8*).

This arrangement did not apply to two incidents. The first was an evening session whereby the key to the room was not found in the absence of the director. I was asked to conduct the interview in the waiting room outside the office. Only a curtain was available to close up the area and so we were subject to much interference. The second incident happened in the last interview session when a big table was brought into the room. The laptop was down that day and the interview was conducted without computer graphics.

Participants

With the aforementioned criteria (*see 3.2.3c*), 20 children were selected for the interviews. Their names were submitted to the director so that arrangement could be made for me to meet with them. Two children from the list had left the Home and were replaced by peers of the same level and gender.

Midway through the interviews, two girls came to me separately asking to be interviewed as their names were not on the list. As they did not belong to the same class level, they had to be interviewed alone. However, the younger girl slept through her interview session.

The interview sessions

At the advice of the director, I would meet each pair of interviewees on the day of the interview. The introduction of the meeting was planned as follows:

a) Self introduction (*first name was used without any title*)
b) Explanation of the research purpose
c) Explanation of the interview process
d) Assurance of anonymity and confidentiality
e) Encouragement for question from interviewees
f) Present the consent form

Once the children had agreed to be interviewed, the interview would start there and then. However, if the children wished not to be involved, s/he would be released immediately. None of the children had expressed such a wish although some did appear to be hesitant. Their agreement to participate was mainly motivated by a sense of curiosity as to what it would be like to be interviewed with a microphone and a laptop.

According to the interview protocol, before the interview start, rapport should be built by casually asking the interviewees things that might interest them and in this case, it was computer games. Once the interview kicked off, note taking on the protocol was not quite possible as there was little time for it and interviewees tend to be distracted by the action. In some cases, they questioned the scribbles and appeared to be suspicious.

The attention span of the interviewees was shorter than expected (*interviewer was inexperienced in interviewing children*). A break was always necessary after about 10 minutes of recording. For some interviewees, it was taken because they were fidgety, and others, because they were eager to hear their recorded voices.

The decision to interview two at a time has its advantages and disadvantages. In the first place, these interviewees were more at ease with their peers around. Peer dynamic was evident, especially when two good friends were placed together. In some cases, information was 'leaked' by their peers just to be confirmed by themselves. Having two together has its problems too. Apparently, it did not only encourage boldness, but also mischief from some of the interviewees. The choice of not taking an authoritative role had largely allowed these antics to pass without consequences. But the concern lies mainly in peer influence. The manuscripts of the interviews have shown that children in the same group were more likely to use similar expressions in their responses. Finally, the structure did not provide for children who wished to be interviewed alone.

Reflections

Considering that the 11 sessions were completed in less than two weeks, it was almost impossible for transcription and analysis of an interview to take place before the next one began. However, the process of each interview was recorded as soon as time permitted

and later developed into contact summary which included information such as time, setting, interviewees, events that took place prior to the interviews and after, and the interviewer's reflection. Pseudonyms were assigned to the interviewees at this stage and so their names would not appear on the paper. The collection of these contact summaries is attached under Appendix 8.

Being new to the role of an interviewer, the interview process was indeed a learning experience for me. Signs of anxiety could be easily detected by my frequent use of 'okay', especially in the first interview. Helplessness was also felt when interviewees decided to be a little wayward and I had to play it down for not wanting to appear authoritative. Such reaction had its payoff, as children seemed less intimidated by the interview and were friendly with me after the session.

3.3.4 Phase Three: Documentations

Towards the end of the interview analysis, a list of documents was drawn up for the purpose of document analysis. Without observation, these documents became the main source for understanding the site. Some of the documents were given to me in my previous visits. Nonetheless, more were required when the findings of the analysis emerged.

In August 2005, arrangement was made with the Home to collect the documents. It was through the call to the director that I came to know of his resignation. Thankfully, he had handed over the task to one of the social workers. Apart from this, the Home's new extension was also ready. Though it was meant for a new group of special needs children, the looked after children were moved over temporarily while their old premises were undergoing renovation. The office had also been relocated in the new premises.

To ensure truthfulness in the representations of the context, the social worker was beseeched to check the draft upon its completion. 'Member Checks' as suggested by Mertens (1998) is an effective way to enhance credibility of claims. She graciously agreed and we met again, after she had gone through the draft, to discuss issues that needed clarification.

3.3.5 Phase Four: Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire was formulated by September 2005, soon after the conclusion of the interview and document analyses. Preparatory works for the survey were less tedious than the interviews as it did not involve any technical equipment other than the big charts (*see Appendix 7*). Administrative arrangements are described in the ensuing paragraphs. Again, at the end of the survey, a token was given to participants as an expression of gratitude. This time each goodie bag comprised a strip of stickers, a pack of biscuits and a mechanical pencil.

Pilot tests

Instead of being generic in its approach like the interviews, this questionnaire was more Home specific. In other words, at least 5 of the 12 questions target at the participants' Home background. For this reason, a pilot test was difficult to execute. Only 2 non-looked after children, one in Primary 1 and another Primary 4, were brought in to test out the clarity of the questions. To avoid possible oversight, feedback was also sought from peers and professors. Finally, when the charts were completed, they were brought to the Home and pilot tests were conducted with 2 Kindergarten children mainly to ascertain the flow of the survey.

Time and timing

The collection of data for the questionnaire survey commenced in mid September 2005 when children returned from their one-week holidays for a new term, which was also the last for the school year. These were busy days for the Primary Six children as their Primary School Leaving Examination was starting in the first week of October. Thus, they were the first group to be surveyed. The timing was propelled by the need to conduct the survey during the pre-examination period as against the post-examination period in the case of interviews so as to take into consideration the time issue to avoid having data from only one period of time (*see 3.1.4d*). Given the pressure to prepare for

examinations, the time slots for the survey were limited and as a result it did not end until the last week of October, just before the examinations of the lower Primary students.

At this point of time, children at the Home had gone through a number of transitions: the building of a new multi-functional premises was completed; they were moved to the premises temporarily to await the renovation of their old dormitory; the director for more than 10 years had left and a new director had taken over; the office had also been relocated to the new premises and preparing itself for the impending extended service to the intellectually disabled children.

Setting

The survey was conducted in a counseling room of less than 100 square foot in the new premises. Located in a recess area, it had all the features fitting for the purpose: quiet, privacy-respected and cozy. However, being known as a counseling room, it also carried a different connotation to the participants when they came for the survey. Clarification of my role and purpose of the meeting became an almost inevitable task during the sessions.

Participants

A name list was collected from the staff prior to the commencement of the survey. Altogether, there were 44 eligible participants. They were thereby scheduled according to their class level starting from Primary 6 for the reason mentioned earlier. In the course of the survey, with 2 discharged from the Home and 1 converted to day care, the population size shrank to 41.

When former participants (*interviewees*) came for the survey, some recognized me right away; others needed promptings to recall. In any case, they looked happy to be called in again. Those whom I thought were a little difficult to handle were surprisingly cooperative this time. Apparently, rapport was built in our last meetings and had become an asset for these.

The Questionnaire Survey

When a participant was comfortably seated in front of the charts, I, sitting on his/her right, would start the session by introducing myself and explaining the purpose and procedure of the survey. Verbal consent was essential before the actual survey began.

Having only one respondent at a time was indeed easier to manage. Since answers demanded by the questionnaire were mostly brief, most sessions took no more than 15 minutes. A break was not required and unruliness was hardly displayed. Nonetheless, a boy was later discovered to have given fake personal information. Being alone with the interviewer had probably encouraged some to take advantage of the situation and speak freely.

General feeling for the survey was positive. One boy actually pleaded to do it over again. When former interviewees were asked to compare their experiences from the interview and the survey, most had preferred the later. The rest, when asked how they felt after the survey, thought it was not difficult and they liked it.

Reflection

Notes were taken right after each participant had left the room to look for the next person to come in. These notes contained mainly a brief description of the participant and the meeting. The information, which was usually keyed into the computer within the next two days, was not critical to the analysis (*see Appendix 10*). However, problems with the questions, for example fuzzy statements, were recorded and taken into consideration when data were analyzed.

This marked the end of the process of data collection for the study. The next section presents the ways these data were being analyzed to reach their findings.

3.4 Method of Analysis

3.4.1 Analysing first phase quantitative data

A quantitative analysis was carried out for the first phase data, which concerned mainly the Home's demography. While the population size of the Home was rather small (*n=39*), simple tabulation and cross tabulation were employed to provide details of the children's profile. The following model gives an example of how children's particulars were collated under simple tabulation:

Model A: Tabulation

Class 03	No. of children	Male	Female	Chinese	Indian
P5					
P4					
P3					
P2					
P1					
Total					

This model was also used to provide information on children's placement history and school matters. In placement history, children's length of stay in the Home, number of placements, reason for placement and channel of referral were tabulated separately in similar format. As for school matters, the items comprised number of transfers, academic performance, conduct, teachers' comments and Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) results for 2003.

Model B: Cross Tabulation

Length of stay	Good		Average		Failed	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
>1/2 yr						
>1 yr						
>2 yr						
>3 yr						
>4 yr						
>5 yr						
<6 yrs						
Total						

Since the population size was insufficient to indicate correlation significance, cross tabulation was used as an attempt to establish a case for difference. Besides length of stay, number of placements, reason for placement and conduct were all placed against academic performance in order that inferences could be drawn from the obvious.

3.4.2 Analysing interviews

Preparation of Raw Data

Interviews were transcribed verbatim (*see Appendix 11 for samples of transcription*). Being familiar with the data, the extra effort was believed to be able to ease future reference and coding. The level of precision in the transcription was close to what Rubin & Rubin (2003:203) have described and it includes, "grammatical errors, digressions, abrupt changes of focus, profanity, exclamations, and other indications of mood such as laughter or tears." Guidelines provided by Poland (2002:641) for alternative abbreviated instructions were also applied.

A contact summary of the interview was also written for each transcription and it contained particulars of the interviewees, time and setting of the interview, events that took place prior and after the interview and the interviewer's reflection (*see Appendix 8*). Given that the questions were structured and well defined and the answers were scarcely lengthy, a summary of main points were thought to be unnecessary.

Preparation of Data for Analysis

Since the interview had taken a structured and thematic approach, coding the themes and concepts was a rather straightforward process. These codes were descriptive in nature in order that they could be easily identified with the themes (Miles & Huberman 1994:57). Although the work was uncomplicated, it did require a few revisions before a list of the codes and their definitions could be drawn up for quick reference. The list was a display of the conceptual framework of the study (*see Appendix 12*).

According to Spencer et al (2003:225), sorting and synthesizing could start at an early stage if "the data are very orderly in their structure either because of the form of the interview conducted, or because of a very precise structure within the topic guide." This was the case of the study and so sorting and synthesizing of the data were carried out simultaneously with the coding process.

Sorting was done by extracting responses to similar questions from various interviewees and placing them together for analysis purposes. The sorted data was useful as they allow "the analyst to focus on each subject in turn so that the detail and distinctions that lie within can be unpacked" (Spencer et al, 2003.228).

In order to compare similarities and differences across cases, and identify recurring ideas and patterns, spot anomalies, spreadsheet was used for the synthesis of key terms, phrases and expressions, usually in the form of the respondent's own language. While it was advisable to keep interpretation to a minimum at this stage (Spencer et al, 2003:229), the examination of the data could take both numerical and descriptive approaches. Thus, frequency of certain terms, phrases or expressions was considered and relevant remarks identified (*see Appendix 13*).

Observations made from each cluster of synthesized data were recorded as memos for the study. It is said,

> *Memos are primarily conceptual in intent. They don't just report data; they tie together different pieces of data into recognizable clusters, often to show that those data are instances of a general concept. Memos can also go well beyond codes and their relationships to any aspect of the study - personal, methodical*

and substantive. They are one of the most useful and powerful sense-making tools at hand.

(Miles & Huberman 1994:72).

The memos recorded therefore covered not just general observations concerning the theme but also possible peer influence on responses, age/gender differences and cases of anomalies (*see Appendix 14*).

Construction of a new Framework

Upon the foundation of the synthesized data and memos, new categories were developed. It has been said that researchers have different views and usage of categories; one of them is "to see categories as ways of grouping, displaying and discussing data thematically such that comparisons between conceptual content can be made or further lines of enquiry pursued" (Spencer et al 2003:205). This was the closest model to the categories that had been developed.

Categories and sub-categories at this stage were made up of specific subjects (such as examination, mischief, school transfer, etc) raised or implied by the interviewees. These categories were classified under various themes that might or might not be similar to those of the previous set. The purpose for developing these categories was to formulate a new framework, which was grounded in the data, for further analysis.

Individual cases were re-coded under a new coding scheme, which was devised to place categories on the central role. This new round of coding was critical for the familiarization of the data in each case and would go on until "the diversity of circumstances and characteristics within the data set has been understood" (Spencer et al 2003:221). While attention was also paid to research questions, sampling strategy and contact summary, the new coding scheme had thus undergone several revisions during the coding process.

Charts of different themes together with their categories and sub-categories were mapped out (*see Appendix 15 for samples*). While statements across cases were represented in the

display, actual accounts rather than summaries were quoted in order to retain the essence of the speech. In so doing, data could be seen in a new light. As Adler & Clark (2003:508) explain, "Data display is a visual image that summarizes a good deal of information. Its aim is to present the researcher herself with a visual image of what's going on and help her to discern patterns."

Data Analysis

With the help of the thematic charts, conclusions for each theme were drawn in keeping with the suggestion of Miles & Huberman (1994:100), "The displayed data need to be examined with care, and conclusions need to be drawn. Those conclusions normally appear in what we called analytic text." While its purpose was to make sense of the data, active analysis took place during this stage. Findings appeared in the final text were used as a basis for the formulation of the questionnaire survey. These findings, however, would not be presented until data from the questionnaire survey were analysed.

3.4.3 Analysing documents

Documents are part of the 'mute evidence', which 'endures physically and thus can be separated across space and time from its author, producer, or user' (Hodder 2003:155). As oppose to observation, they do not contain interaction of the researcher and the context. Hence, they have the advantage of being well defined and controlled. Nonetheless, their potential distance from reality as well as accuracy of researcher's interpretation ought to be ascertained through clarification from staff members.

The documents collected from the Home belonged to the lot that the researcher had access to. They were categorized according to the types of publication. The analysis of documents began with an understanding of the purpose that it intended to serve, which was to provide the study with a context. To ensure relevance of the information, the description was selective and geared towards the focus of the study. As a result, themes were developed, not only to provide an overview of the site, but also to lend support to the analysis of the interview and questionnaire survey. Each theme ends with a discussion of the main points.

3.4.4 Analysing the questionnaire survey

Data collected from the questionnaire survey were mainly quantitative in nature. Apart from the respondents' particulars, there were altogether twelve questions and they were cast in four different styles of questioning, as explained above (*see 3.2.3 Questionnaire Survey b*).

To begin with, respondents' particulars were collated into a simple tabulation table (*see Model C)*. Besides code number, age, class level and gender, the data had also included information on respondents' school transfer found in Question 8. This table was an essential reference for individual responses to the questions and had served as a template for children to be divided into the upper and lower Primary groups (*19 and 22 respectively; n=41*). Although comparison of the two age groups was not the main thrust of the study, the practice was necessary if the influence of maturity on the result was to be identified.

Model C: Respondents' Particulars

Code	Age	Year of birth	Class	Gender	No. of time for school transfer	Year of school transfer	Remarks
001							
002							
003							
004							
005							
006							
007							
008							
009							
...							

Different formats of tabulation had been employed to make sense of data collected from different styles of questioning. Given a small population size, a straightforward approach was adopted for *Cafeteria-style and Likert-type* questions as raw data of individual choices cum additional remarks were all reflected in the tables. The only difference between the two types of question was that the former allowed more than one answers from individual respondent, whereas the later did not. Only one answer was possible

from the *Likert-type scale,* which marked *yes, maybe* and *no,* though a small number of respondents had made use of the gap in between to give an alternate rating. In view of the need for subgroup comparison, subtotal was provided for both upper and lower Primary children in the tables.

Model D: Likert-type Question

Code	No		Maybe		Yes	Remarks
001						
002						
003						
004						
005						
006						
007						
008						
009						
...						
P4-6						

While *Cafeteria-style and Likert-type* questions concerned mainly two variables, a *Mix-n-Match* question had three to deal with. It was being used only once in the survey for Question 8 whereby respondents were asked to name the decision makers for various school matters. A display of raw data in this case would be too cumbersome for the table. As a result, not only had the responses for the upper and lower Primary to be presented in separate tables, registration of data involved only the number of times each personnel had been named for a particular school matter.

Model E

P4-6	Teachers	Friends	Jieh Jieh Nellie	Social Worker	House-mother	Director	Parents	Myself	Principal	?
CCA										
Time to reach school and time to return										
Pocket money										
Stationery										
Go out with friends										
School excursions										
Visits from friends										
Visits from family										
School Transfer/ school										

Data are the number of times the personnel being mentioned

Finally, data collected from the *unfinished sentence* were mainly qualitative in nature. The first step forward was to sort out and group together responses that raised similar issues. These issues would then serve as the bottom line for the identification of themes and the formulation of a theme chart. A theme chart was necessary in this case as it allowed organized perspectives to be placed side by side for comparison. Any repetitive statement would be represented only by a numeral in parenthesis to indicate the number of times it had been mentioned. Since not all responses of the same theme shared a similar emphasis, entering data in different rows marked the differentiation in views. Multiple revisions were made before the chart was finalized for interpretation.

Model E

Facility	Programme	Teachers	Collective actions	Peers	Personal actions

**() indicates number of times mentioned*

Unlike the table for respondents' particulars, which is attached in the appendix, tables for all the twelve questions are displayed together with the analytical text (*see Chapter 6 and 7*). This would allow readers to check for themselves how conclusions were being drawn from the collected materials.

3.5 Conclusion

The chapter of methodology has documented the conceptualisation of a research design for the study of looked after children's perspectives of school to its execution step by step. It started by considering various philosophical standpoints, and taking descriptive to be its main thrust, although it had admitted to its exploratory nature since the study was new in the local field. This had led to the choice of an interpretive paradigm while both quantitative and qualitative tools could be used for optimal result. With the stage set

and various practical factors weighed, a mixed method approach was adopted. As such, validity and generalizability of the study had to be enhanced through the employment of triangulation, respondents' validation and researcher's reflexivity in the research process.

A research design was thereby drawn out to match the framework of the study. It involved selecting a local Children's Home as the setting and its mainstream Primary school charges as the participants. Due to the age of the participants, observation was ruled out to minimize researcher's influence. Ultimately, four instruments were planned to capture both the context (*the children's Home*) and contents (*the children's views*) and they are statistics, interviews, documents and questionnaire survey.

Execution of the research design began with the identification of the Home and gaining access from the gatekeeper. Once agreement was reached, a demographic study took place and it involved the collection of children's particulars concerning their placement history and school performance. The results were important guidelines for the development of the interview schedule and selection of interviewees. At least half of the population were selected to be representatives of different subgroups, such as age, gender, race, etc. Meanwhile, documents were also collected to provide an overview of the Home's context. While different instruments called for different methods of analysis, each was analysed before the implementation of the next in line. As such, findings from one stage of data collection were often instrumental in the formation of the other. Being the last instrument, the questionnaire survey was not only crucial in filling datum gaps but also serving as a means for respondents' validation, and it had the participation of the whole population.

Despite its seemingly logical development, the journey in charting the methodology procedure was both methodical and haphazard. While not all details were recorded here, its limitations were explicated in the chapter of introduction. What is to follow is the disclosure of the findings from the various instruments.

Chapter Four: Preliminary Findings

Children's Profile

Information on the children's profile was collected in February 2004. At that point in time, there were a total of 57 children in the residential Home. Of the 57 children, 7 were placed after October 2003 (in other words, after the primary school's year-end examination), 4 were attending special schools, and 7 were preschool students in 2003. Since the study sets out to collect data about Primary School children, in particular their academic performance, the population for the case was reduced to 39 children. These children were in the residential Home when they sat for their examinations in October 2003 and had remained there, at least up till February 2004.

The residential Home has an age/school stipulation. It does not admit children who are younger than play school age, which is 3 years old, or beyond primary school education. Those who have completed their primary school education will be either restored to their biological homes or transferred to another residential Home. Since Primary 6 children of the 2003 cohort have all been either restored or transferred, their data would not be fit to be included in the general studies. However, their performance in the citywide examination, the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), will still be used, but be presented as a separate unit.

This chapter aims to provide some background knowledge of the primary school age children in the Home. They are described in three segments: demographic profile, placement particulars and school performance. The last section is an attempt I have made in order to gain an understanding of the relationship between children's placement and school performance. Since the population size is small, it is accomplished by simple cross tabulation.

4.1 Demographic Profile of the Children

Table 4.1 Demographic Profile

Class 03	No. of children	Male	Female
P5	7	3	4
P4	11	3	8
P3	6	3	3
P2	8	3	5
P1	7	3	4
Total	39	15	24

There are more girls than boys.

The classes that the children are in does not necessarily reflect their age. A total of 8 children are either one or two years older than their peers. Some were not attending schools before placement in the Home and others were held back as they were deemed not ready by the kindergarten's assessment.

4.2 Placement

4.2.1 Length of Stay

Table 4.2 Length of Stay

Class 2003	less than 1/2 yr	less than 1 yr	less than 2 yrs	less than 3 yrs	less than 4 yrs	less than 5 yrs	less than 6 yrs	more than 6 yrs
P5	3			2	1			1
P4	2	1	2	1	2	1		2
P3	1	1		2	2			
P2	2	1	2	1	2			
P1	1		1		5			
Total	9	3	5	6	12	1		3

More children have stayed in the residential Home for less than three years. However, the largest single year group would be those who have been there for almost four years. If the length of stay is checked against the classes they were in, we will notice that more than half of the children have started Primary One in the Home.

4.2.2 Number of Placements

Table 4.3 Number of Placements

Class 03	Once	Twice (same Home)	Twice (different Home)	Thrice (same Home)
P5	5	2		
P4	6	4	1	
P3	4	1	1	
P2	7			1
P1	7			
Total	29	7	2	1

Unlike looked after children in western literature (such as Fletcher-Campbell 1998; Francis 2000; Harker et al. 2003), children in this residential Home did not experience as many transfers of placement; the mean is 1.28. Perhaps the age limit of this study is partly responsible for the fewer cases. The western literature usually includes children in the Secondary School and their age ranges from 10 to 18. To find whether there are other cultural or contextual factors for the phenomenon, a separate investigation would have to be carried out.

Children who have gone through 2 to 3 placements in the same residential Home are mainly children whose restoration has failed. This accounts for about a quarter of the research population. The Home's philosophy of care and rights may explain the phenomenon. It is convinced that children are best under the care of their own families or extended family members. Since it is not a place of safety appointed by the government, the rights to the children remains with their parents.

In view of the length of stay and the number of placements the children in this Home have experienced, it seems that disruption of school attendance is not a major problem. Moreover, placement or change of placement during primary school period may or may not lead to school transfer for these children. The point will be further elaborated in a later section of this report (*see 4.3.1*). As of now, suffice it to say that the children here do have a more stable care in comparison to their western counterparts.

4.2.3 Reason for Placement

Table 4.4 Reason for Placements

Class 03	AP	SP	AA	NG	BH	PN	EL	PM	Others
P5	2	2		1	2				
P4	1	2	2	2	2		1		1
P3	1	2		1		1			1
P2	2	3	1			1		1	
P1		5						2	
Total	6	14	3	4	4	2	1	3	2

AP - Absentee Parents	6
SP - Single Parent	14
AA - Alleged Abused	3
NG - Negligence	4
BH - Behaviour Problems	4
PN - Protection	2
EL - Elected	1
PM - Parent's mental incapability	3
Others	2
Total:	39

Although only one reason is provided in the documentation in each case of placement, children who require residential care usually come with a "repertoire" of familial and personal problems. As was mentioned in the Home's Annual Report 2001,

> ...most of them exhibit behavioural problems such as stealing, fighting, persistent lying, running away from home, playing truant, beating up parents and using vulgarities. These are only the tip of the iceberg as the root cause of the problem lies in the dysfunctional interaction patterns in their families and limited problem-solving skills where their parents struggle with broken relationships, addictions, financial difficulties, violence and other personal issues. (p. 17)

The most stated reason was single parent who is unable to provide reasonable care for his/her child/children (approximately 35.9%). Since only the main reason for placement is collected, it is possible that some of the other cases, such as behavioural, negligence and protection, also took place in a single parent home. The phenomenon is consistent with Bebbinton and Miles' discovery (1989) that single parents who lack the support of other social networks will have difficulty in coping with the tension of raising a family. Thus, single parenthood is a problem when it is coupled with other problems like poverty, lack of support, and personal strife. Consequently, pre-care experience of these children is usually marked by deprivation and chaos. This is likely to put them at a disadvantage when they go to school (Osborn 1990; Buttrick 1992; Minty 2000; Borland 2000; etc).

Child abuse is defined by the subordinate courts in its Study of Children and Young Persons In Need of Care and Protection (Subordinate Courts 2004) as any act by a parent, guardian, or caregiver that endangers or impairs the child's physical or emotional well-being. Neglect has been identified as the most common abuse (85%) among children in the Care and Protection Order (CPO) cases. In this study, abuse refers to psychological, physical and sexual aggression of the caregiver, and neglect is taken as a separate issue.

4.2.4 Referral

Table 4.5 Referral

Class 2003	MCDS	Child's Family	School	Police	Hospital	Others
P5	3	2	1			1
P4	5	2		1	1	2
P3	1				2	3
P2	3	1	1		1	2
P1	4	2				1
Total	16	7	2	1	4	9

MCDS stands for Ministry of Community Development and Sports (the title has been changed to Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports-MCYS in 2004). The Home is partially funded by this government body and so has the obligation to take in mandatory cases.

The rest were accepted on compassionate grounds even though they may be cases referred by different institutions. Again, because the Home is not a place of safety, none of the children have had a brush with the law. The one that was referred by Police was a child who refused to go home. Others include social service centres such as counselling centres, other residential Homes, before and after school cares and churches.

4.3 School Performance

4.3.1 School Transfers

Table 4.6 School Transfers

Class 03	Once		Twice	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
P5	3	1		
P4	1	4		
P3	1			
P2	1	1		
P1		1		
Total	6	7		

Out of the 39 children, 13, which accounts for a third of the population, have experienced school transfers at least once. Whether any of them has done so for more than once is not known since not all previous records are filed.

Only 5 of the 13 children who had been transferred from another school had their previous school results filed. While transfer of school usually happens because of placement, a comparison of school performance before and after the transfer was done. Of the 5, 3 have demonstrated consistency in their academic performance; 1 failed after the transfer and another, a girl in P1, made tremendous progress.

4.3.2 Academic Performance (October 2003)

Grading of the academic performance is based on the results of each child's year-end examination, which usually takes place in October. It is also the total aggregate of all academic subjects translated into percentage. The following table presents the grading system applied for various levels as stipulated by the Ministry of Education for local primary schools as of 2003.

Table 4.7 Grading System for Singapore's Primary Schools - 2003

	0-19	20-29	30-34	35-49	50-59	60-69	70-74	75-84	85-90	91-100
P6 Eml & 2	U	E		D	C	B		A		A*
P6 Em3	U		Grade 4		Grade 3		Grade 2		Grade 1	
P5 Eml & 2	U	E		D	C	B		A		A*
P5 Em3	Grade 4				Grade 3		Grade 2		Grade 1	
P1-4	Band 4				Band 3		Band 2		Band 1	
	0-19	20-29	30-34	35-49	50-59	60-69	70-74	75-84	85-90	91-100

Due to its complexity, a simplified version was adopted for the study: anything below 50 is considered failed, from 50-74 is taken as average, and "Good" is equivalent to 75 and above. For P4 students, not aggregates but 'band' attainments are provided in the report card. Since the whole P4 cohort has failed their examinations, categorizing their performance was easy

Table 4.8 Academic Performance - 2003

Class 03	Good		Average		Failed	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
P5			2		1	2
P4					3	8
P3	1	1	1	1		1
P2	2	1	1	1		2
P1			3	2	1	1
Total	3	2	7	4	5	14

There are 4 missing records, 2 of which are unavailable since the children have missed their examination due to family crisis. However, there are clearly more failures than passes. Half of the six P5 children are EM 3 students and all of the P4 children are to be promoted to EM 3 classes (*EM 3 students learn English and the mother tongue at a basic level*). When we compare the figure with that of the Education Statistics Digestion (Ministry of Education 2003), where only about 6.34% of the whole P5 cohort is in EM3, the Home undoubtedly has a high representation of underachievers.

The data have also shown a higher failure rate among girls than boys. Apart from the missing records, 14 of the 20 girls had failed (*just over two thirds*) as compare to 5 of the 15 boys (*exactly a third*). While gender differences were not found in either vulnerability or resilience among the most disadvantaged social group in Osborn's 1990 publication, there is definitely a need for the significance of this finding to be substantiated by further research.

On the other hand, the number of school transfers due to placement was not high. Thus, such interruption could not be attributed as the main cause for poor results. Moreover, most children attained high attendance rates except for one who had missed school for 10

days. Consequently, school disruption has to be ruled out as a possible reason for poor attainment.

The lower primary children appear to have done better than the upper primary. There is therefore a need to look into the past records of the upper primary children to verify if the problem lies in the syllabus.

4.3.3 Academic Performance (Past records)

Table 4.9 Academic Performance (Past records)

P5 Class	Good		Average		Failed	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
2003			2		1	2
2002			1	1	2	1
2001			1		2	2
2000				1	2	1
1999			1			1

P4 Class	Good		Average		Failed	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
2003					3	8
2002					2	7
2001				1	4	2
2000					3	2

P3 Class	Good		Average		Failed	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
2003	1	1	1	1		1
2002		2	1			1
2001		2	1			1

Although the past records are incomplete due to missing information or loss of previous school results, the trend has been quite consistent. Most children who did not do well in their 2003 examination had not done well in the previous years either. Perhaps a few anecdotes from the P5 class will shed some light on the situation.

A boy who passed his EM3 examination has failed for the past three years he has been at the Home. Another in the EM2 class passed his examination since placement in P3 except that his grade for the 2nd language has plummeted from 71% to 27%. A girl has

failed since P1 and a boy who managed to pass his P1 examination failed all the rest since then. A more haphazard performance is seen in an EM2 girl who passed one year and failed another. She was found to have gone through an unsuccessful restoration.

The conclusion leads to a further question as to why the majority of the current lower primary cohorts are doing all right. Is it possible that those who have done well in schools stand a higher chance for an early and successful restoration? Although having an answer would be helpful, it will not be pursued here as the population size is too small for any conclusive outcome.

4.3.4 Conduct

Table 4.10 Conduct

Class 2003	V. Good		Good		Fair	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
P5			3	3		
P4			1	6	2	2
P3	1	3	1			
P2	*1	2	2	1		1
P1			3	4		
Total	2	5	10	14	2	3

Again, 4 records are missing. According to the report cards, the majority of the children had demonstrated acceptable behaviour, out of which 7 were outstanding. Of the 7, one P2 boy (marked with an *) was deemed excellent in his conduct. Conversely, 5 were said to be fair. It was interesting for the researcher to note that of the 4 children who were placed in the Home on grounds of behavioural problems, only 1 was considered to deserve a "Fair" for his conduct rating; the rest were "Good" by their teachers' standard.

4.3.5 Teacher's comments

Finally, teachers' remarks on the report books were noted. Those that captured the researcher's attention were areas teachers thought the child should work on. They are summarized as follow:

Need to be focused	5
Need to be more attentive	3
Need concentration	1
Need determination	2
Need greater effort	2
Need help	1
Need supervision at home	2
Need better peer communication	2
Need to control emotion	1

While there are 18 statements on what a child needs, 15 focus on improving their academic development, 2 social development and 1 emotional development. Attention is drawn to the remarks on home supervision. According to the Director of the residential Home, before enrolment, not only principals but also class teachers were informed of the child's background; after enrolment, there are regular review sessions for the class teachers to meet with the Home's counsellors. How effective is the review session in helping teachers to understand and guide the children is not known. Overseas research has indicated the importance of teachers' understanding and care in the development of looked after children (Gilligan 1998; Martin & Jackson 2002; Harker et al. 2003). If teachers are not equipped to work with the Home's personnel in helping a looked after child, it is likely that these children will suffer further deprivation in school.

4.3.6 PSLE Result for the 2003 cohort

Table 4.11 PSLE Result for the 2003 Cohort

No.	Race	Age	Gender	Stream	Result
1	Indian	13	M	EM3	89/200
2	Chinese	13	M	EM3	100/200
3	Chinese	13	F	EM3	117/200
4	Chinese	12	M	EM3	95/200
5	Chinese	12	F	EM2	124/300
6	Indian	12	F	EM2	152/300
7	Indian			EM3	87/200

7 sat in the 2003 Primary School Leaving Examination; 2 were EM2 students and 5 EM3. One of the EM3 students was sitting in the exam for a second time, the first time had been as an EM2 student. Only 2 of the 5 EM3 children have crossed the 50% benchmark and only 1 of the 2 EM2 children managed to do so. Of the 3 who had passed their examinations, 2 barely crossed the line. While EM3 students made up about 12% of that

year's overall P6 cohort (Education Statistics Digestion 2003), 97.2% of those who sat for the citywide examination were reported to have made it to the secondary school (The Sunday Times, 23 Nov 2003). In comparison, only 40% of the children in the Home managed to make it to secondary school and we are again confronted by the low attainment of these children.

4.4 Cross Tabulation

The limited population size in this study forbids the use of correlation to judge association of various placement variables with academic performance. However, cross tabulation of variables is attempted here to see if there is a case for differences.

4.4.1 Length of Stay and Academic Performance

Table 4.12 Length of Stay and Academic Performance

Length of stay	Good		Average		Failed	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
less than 1/2 yr	1			1	1	3
less than 1 yr	1			1		1
less than 2 yr	1			1		2
less than 3 yr		2	1	1		2
less than 4 yr			5	1	1	5
less than 5 yr						1
more than 6 yrs					3	
Total	3	2	6	5	5	14

One observation of this table is that only children who had stayed for less than 3 years in the Home have done well. The longer the period the higher are the chances of them being underachievers. The situation may be explained in two different perspectives:

a) Children who do better are likely to have better familial experience and support; thus the possibilities of their restoration are higher and their stay at the residential Home is shorter. The study of Weiner & Weiner (1990) argues that children who have a concerned parent are more likely to do better academically. Whether this is true in the local context is to be proven by further research.

b) The length of stay apparently does not help children's school progress. In other words, long-term placement does not necessarily help to revert early deprivation due to the familial background of these children. If this is so, it makes finding out the elements that support school progress in the Home all the more important.

4.4.2 Number of Placements and Academic Performance

Table 4.13 Number of Placements and Academic Performance

Number of Placements	Good		Average		Failed	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Once	3	2	6	5	3	9
Twice (same Home)					2	3
Twice (different Home)						2
Thrice (same Home)						
	3	2	6	5	5	14

Although it is difficult to predict academic outcomes of first timers at the Home, the fate of those who have gone through either failed restoration or transfer of Home seems to be destined for failure. The result resonates with what has been written about the effect of instability and lack of continuity in placement on children's school performance (Jackson 1989; Fletcher-Campbell 1998).

4.4.3 Reason for Placement and Academic Performance

Table 4.14 Reason for Placement and Academic Performance

Reason for Placement	Good		Average		Failed	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
AP (3)	1		1		1	
SP (13)	1		4	2	2	4
AA (3)					1	2
NG (4)				1		3
BH (4)			1		1	2
PN (2)		2				
EL (1)						1
PM (3)				1		2
Others (2)	1			1		
	3	2	6	5	5	14

Inferences are harder in the case of reasons for placement because there are many reasons but the population size is small. Perhaps, an interesting point could be made on 'Single Parent' as the number is slightly bigger. It appears that 5 out of 7 boys in this category passed their examination whereas only 2 of the 6 girls managed to do so. This puts the general finding that boys are more vulnerable than girls in situations like parents' divorce cited by Osborn (1990) in question. Then again, to know if certain experiences are more detrimental than others to children's academic performance requires not only a larger sample size but also the control of certain factors such as a child's social support.

4.4.4 Conduct and Academic Performance

Table 4.15 Conduct and Academic Performance

Conduct	Good		Average		Failed	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
V. good	1	1	1	2		2
Good	2	1	5	3	3	9
Fair					2	3
Total	3	2	6	5	5	14

While good conduct does not always bring about good grades, it is obvious that those who have displayed problematic behaviour in school had also failed their examination. The result is to be expected as behavioural problems are likely to spawn a series of other factors that hinder learning such as inattentiveness in class, difficulty in relating with teachers and peers, poor self-image, etc.

4.5 Conclusion

An overarching concern which emerged from the above findings is the low attainments of academic performance of this group of children. More than half of the children have started Primary One in the Home. However, it is mainly those who have spent more than 3 years at the Home that are showing poor records of school progress. On the other hand, interruptions such as school transfer, failed restoration and change of placement are not particularly high as compared to their western counterparts. While pre-care experience may have a part to play, other reasons such as lack of familial support, ineffective

Home's programme, and failed restoration were also found to be possible factors for impeding school progress. On the other hand, those who have been successfully restored are not in the statistics. While a full investigation would require the follow up of these children in their homes to see if they are the academically successful ones, it is not being carried out in this study.

In terms of conduct, even though the Home's annual report had referred to the severity of these children's behavioural problems, a majority of their report cards showed that they were generally well behaved in schools. Judging from their teachers' remarks, improvement was mostly required in the area related to learning attitude. On hind sight, the discrepancy could be a result of differentiation of the two professions in labelling a phenomenon; while teachers thought it was poor attitude, the Home might refer to it as poor behaviour. Moreover, there is a possibility that the teaching profession is not fully equipped to deal with looked after children. This leads to the question of collaboration between the Ministry of Education and various social work units under the umbrella of MCYS and NCSS.

Being the first phase of data analysis, the findings in this chapter are mostly descriptive, and also comprise some personal observations. Its advantage is manifold, particularly in laying the groundwork for the selection of interviewees in the next phase. Yet, the conclusiveness of its findings is also constrained by the size of its population. Certain assumptions have to be omitted, for example, will better school performance heighten the chance of successful restoration and does the age of placement make a difference in school performance. Finally, a flaw was spotted in the data collected. It is noted that family background should be a separate item from the reasons for placement. This would clarify the reasons for single parent to admit their children and those admitted with other reasons would have their parent's marital status stated.

Chapter Five: The Setting

The Home

Although the study has taken an ethnographic approach, observation is not part of its instruments for the collection of data. The reason for its omission was explained in the chapter on methodology (see *3.2.2 Researcher's Role*). Hence, to gain a better understanding of the setting, secondary sources have been employed. They are the documents collected from the Home.

Documents are limited in their breadth and accuracy in representing reality. Therefore, care has to be taken in the way they are used and verification is necessary to ensure validity of the information. These documents were collected when the analysis of the interviews was in progress, and studied when conclusions were drawn. In other words, they would have little influence on the way primary data was interpreted. Nonetheless, they were found useful in providing a context to the interpretation, and so were cited in the findings. In the case of having information that is valid, at least for the period of data collection, one of the social workers in the Home was sought to clarify certain matters as well as verify the text.

The decision to present this chapter ahead of the chapter on interview analysis was mainly prompted by the need to enhance readability and understanding of the subsequent analyses. This chapter begins with a list of documents that were collected and studied. They have been classified under different genres. The themes and information that followed were developed with the focus of the study in mind. Though not meant to be comprehensive and exhaustive, they were to provide an adequate framework for the next chapter. Consequently, a discussion is added at the end of each theme in an effort to focus the section on its possible applications.

5.1 List of Documents:

Home's Publications

Annual Report 1999
Annual Report 2000
Annual Report 2001
Annual Report 2002
Annual Report 2003
Annual Report 2004
Profile of the Home (Prepared in 2001 for submission to MCDS)
Brochure

Forms relating to Placement

Parent's Contract
Written Contract
Agreement (Undertaking by care person)
Admission Coding form
Total Care Plan of Resident

Theses

Tan, H. C. (2000) *Away from home–Experiences of children in residential care.* Thesis for Bachelor of Social Work Degree (Honours), Curtin University of Technology, School of Social Work, Australia.

Yeo, K. L. T. (1995/96) *A children's home as a support to single parents.* Thesis for Bachelor of Social Science Degree (Honours), National University of Singapore, Department of Social Work And Psychology, Singapore.

Official Manual

Guidelines on Minimum Standards of Care for Children's Home (Confidential), Ministry of Community Development, August 1999.

5.2 Overview of the Home

5.2.1 Emphasis

The Home was founded in the 1960s with a mission "to provide loving, Christian nurture for needy and disadvantaged children of all races and religions, so as to prepare them to be happy and responsible members of the family and community." Three goals were established:

1. To develop the spiritual, educational, social and emotional well-being of children.
2. To assist parents in problem-solving and coping with their difficulties.
3. To provide community services that strengthen family relationships and enhance quality of family life.

(Brochure)

The success of the Home's programme is assessed by the desired outcomes listed as follows:

1. All children to experience some positive changes in their thoughts and behaviours.
2. To enable 80% of the children to integrate into their families or extended families upon discharge.
3. All discharged children to be able to adjust to new environment and not commit any chargeable offence for the next two years.
4. To involve organizations and volunteers in the various programmes that enhance the developmental needs of the children.

(Profile of the Home, 2001)

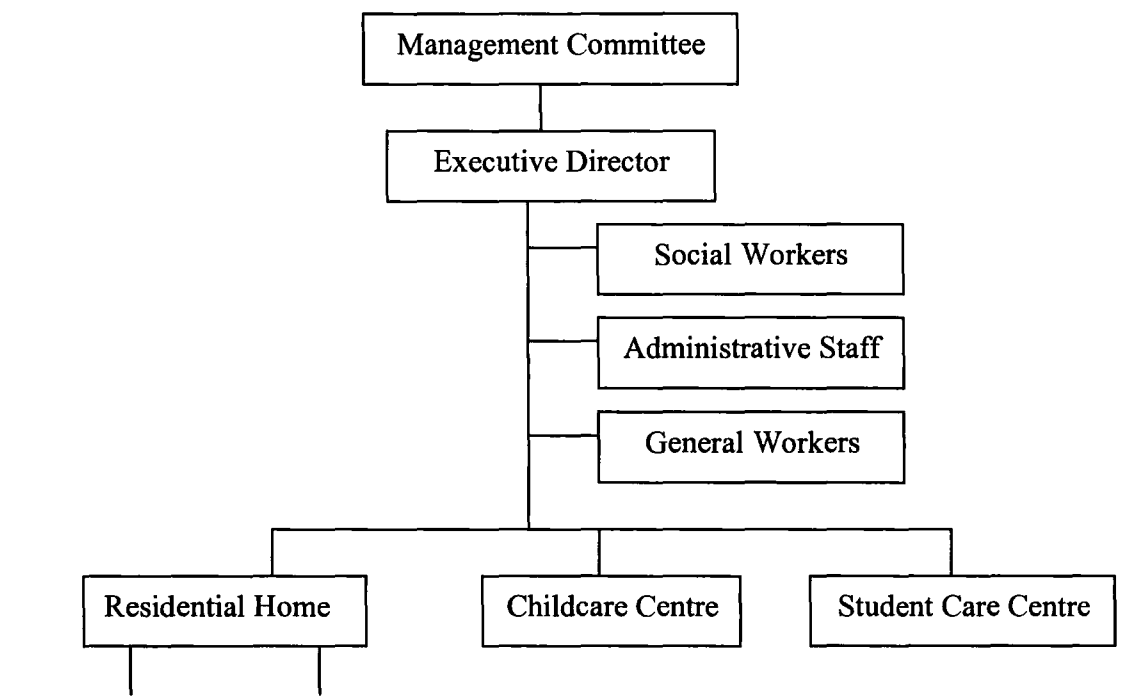
5.2.2 Functions

Characteristics

The Home is an independent institution, which receives grants from the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) and donations from churches, corporations and individuals. It is also a full member of the National Council of Social Service. While there are two different kinds of Home in the local context, gazetted and non-gazetted, the Home in question belongs to the latter. By non-gazetted, it means that the Home accepts children on compassionate or voluntary grounds.

Organization Chart

Diagram 5.1 Organisation Chart



Services

The main service provided is the Residential Home, which admits children aged 4 to 12 years old. There are a number of spin-offs from this main service and they are also made available to the public:

1. Child-Care Centre: for children aged 3-6 years old who have working parents.
2. Students' Care Centre: for school-going children aged 7-12 years old whose parents are working and have difficulties in supervising their children.
3. Family Counselling and Family Life Education: for families who have difficulties in coping with their children or are experiencing stress.
4. Volunteer Development Programme: for volunteers who contribute their time and service to the Home.
5. Public Education: for members of the public and organisations who are interested to know more about the Home and its services.

(Annual Report 2004)

As was found out later, the Students' Care Centre actually takes in children from aged 7 to 16. Since the Home's residential service is not available to those who have completed primary school, the centre provides an opportunity for former residents who continue to require care services when they are in secondary school to come to the Home.

5.2.3 Staff and their Roles

This section focuses mainly on the staff who are directly involved in the daily activities of the children at the residential unit. Although it is not intended to be exhaustive, practices that may not be on the official job description but likely to have an impact on the children will be added in.

Executive Director: Trained in social work, he oversees the daily running and development of the Home. In an interview with Tan (2000:60), the man at the helm pointed out his role to be one that helps children "come to terms with their family's situation, understand their family circumstances and not to blame themselves for their parents' separation or any family mishaps." Besides his prominent role in management and administration, he added that children saw him as a disciplinarian who has the authority to punish them (ibid.).

Social Workers: There are two of them and their roles are to assist the director in the administration of the Home and assessment of children's eligibility for placement. What tops their list of responsibilities would be to provide appropriate help to families with needs and assisting children in times of transition and crisis. In both cases, counselling sessions have to be conducted and thus the image they portrayed is one that is friendlier and less authoritative.

Programme Coordinator: She coordinates children's daily activities such as tuition programmes, outings and religious sessions. Whenever there is a shortage of helpers, she will also stand in to take the role of a tutor or religious teacher. School related issues, big or small like haircuts and buying of uniforms, are all under her charge. Perhaps this is the reason why she described her role as a caretaker with the responsibilities of regular parents (Tan 2000:63).

Housemothers: There are four of them. Like their titles, housemothers perform duties that cater to the physical needs of children. With an accommodation capacity of 70 children in the residential unit, children are expected to follow a structured schedule and perform certain duties set by the Home. As such, housemothers are also required to act as supervisors as they are the ones who spend the longest hours with the children at the Home. Housemothers are usually recruited from other Asian countries such as Myanmar, Indonesia and Philippines. Foreign workers are sought because the job requires long working hours (such as staying over and week-end commitment) and few locals would be willing to take it up.

5.2.4 Resources

Physical Resources

Before reconstruction started in mid 2004, there were 8 single-storey blocks at the Home and they were used for the following functions:

a. a general office
b. four blocks of dormitory (each has 2 bedrooms, 1 staff room, 1 living cum study area and bathroom).

c. a dining/multi-purpose hall (that had a performing stage)
d. a chapel cum reading room
e. a day care centre
f. a student care centre cum conference room

Indoor and outdoor facilities that catered to the needs of children included:

a. a library (reading room)
b. a music room
c. a computer laboratory
d. a basketball court
e. a badminton court
f. a playground (whereby half of it was a sand pit)
g. an animal farm
h. an aviary

The reconstruction was the result of the Home's plan to extend its services to the intellectually disabled children. During this period of time, the Home had temporarily ceased the operations of the Childcare Centre and Student Care Centre as their centres had to be demolished to make way for the new buildings. The new premises were erected not only to accommodate the new group of children but also to relocate some of the above facilities, such as the general office, multi-purpose hall and playground. Consequently, the animal farm and aviary were removed and a new street soccer court was added in. The computer laboratory, on the other hand, was not available during the time of reconstruction and had to be refurbished before children could make use of the facilities. Previously, it was equipped with about 10 computers and volunteers would come in to supervise and guide the children as they use the computers.

Floor plans of the Home in its former and current states are found on figure 5.2 and 5.3.

Diagram 5.2 Floor Plan (prior to interviews)

(Tan 2000)

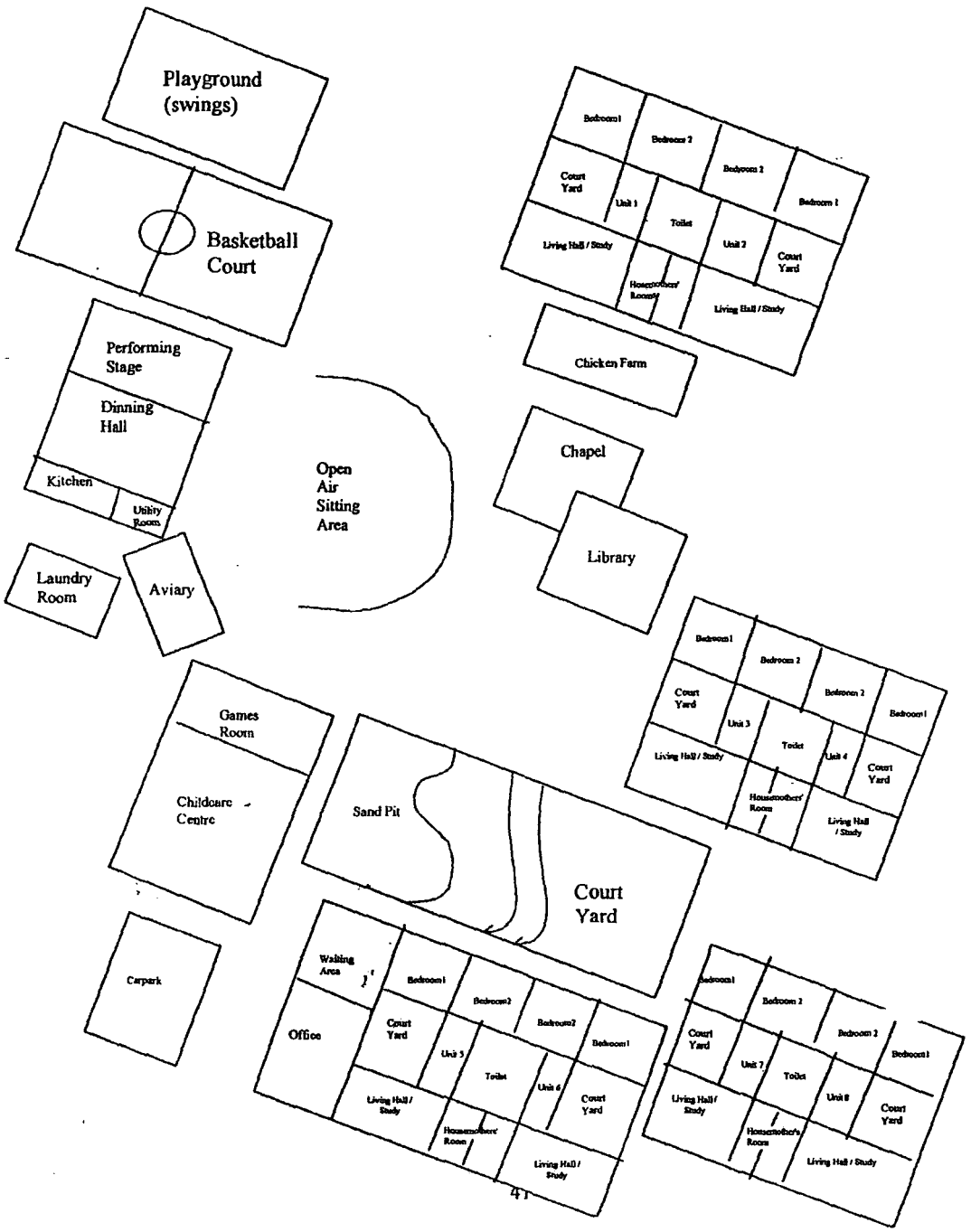
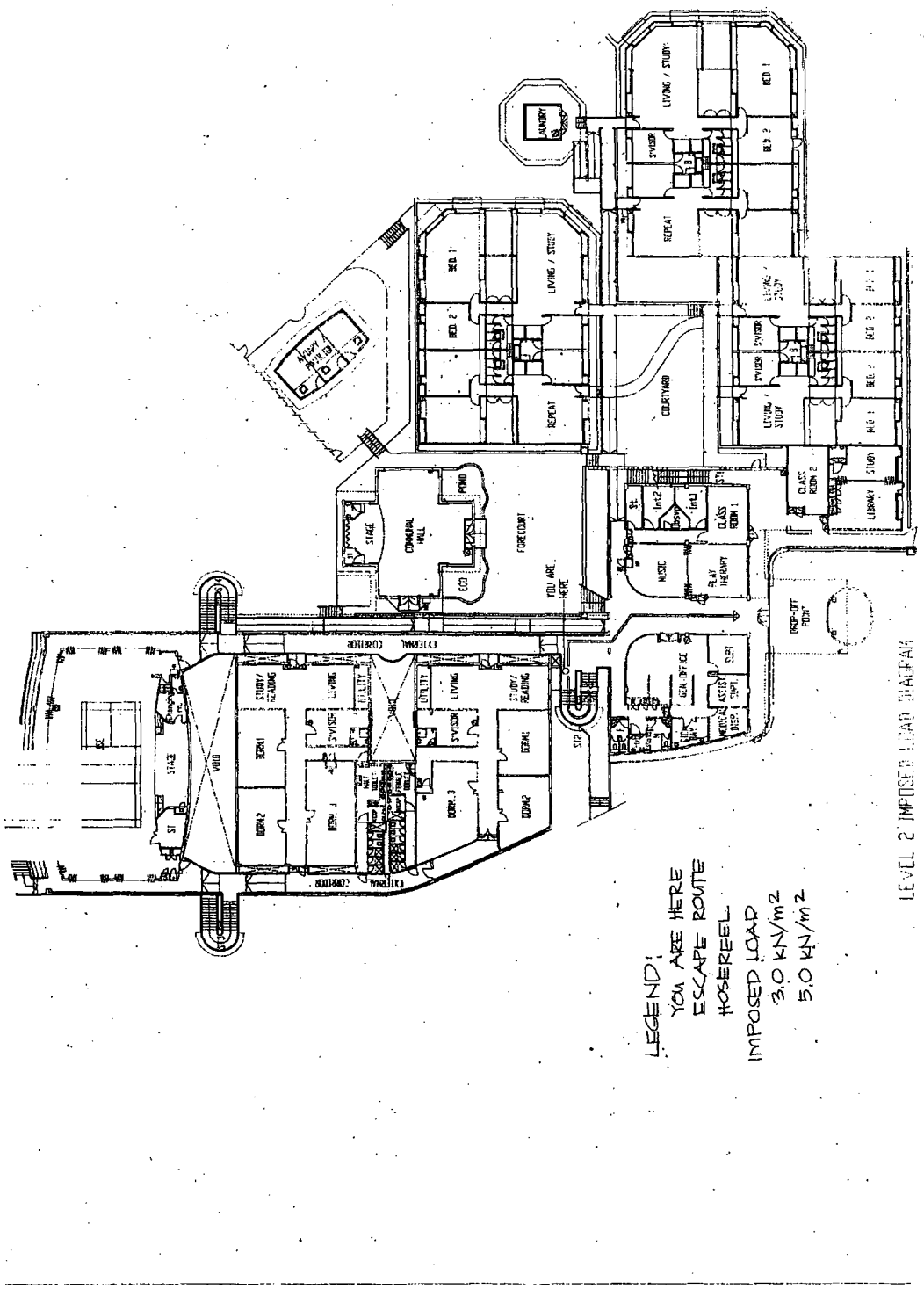


Diagram 5.3 Floor Plan (at the end of questionnaire survey)



Human Resources

Other than the staff, another group of grown-ups who are actively involved in the lives of these children in the Home would be the volunteers. The regular ones are those who come in to tutor them in their schoolwork, or conduct non-curriculum lessons such as computer and piano. Brochures were printed to request for voluntary assistance. Nevertheless, recruitment comes mainly from recommendations of National Council of Social Service (NCSS), National Volunteers Centre (NVC) and churches or by word of month.

According to the Diary of Events in the annual reports, there is another group of volunteers who usually represent an organisation. They visit as and when the organisation sponsors a special programme for the children. The majority were excursions, followed by seasonal festive celebrations and parties, and there were also invitations extended to the children to perform song items for special events. For the year of 2003, there were about 50 such groups, and a surge is witnessed in 2004 when the number crossed 60.

Discussion:

The statements of the Home have clearly made the restoration of families its first and foremost mission in caring for children. By and large, children were admitted with the understanding that their families needed time and help to resolve some crises and help is available in the Home. Children in care are to be prepared, as much as possible, for re-integration into their families, and the preparations often involve the shaping of behavioural pattern. Such strong family focus has somehow distinguished the Home from its counterparts in the west where similar ethos is not obvious. This makes direct application of western literature in the local context all the more inadequate.

Though not its top priority, educational needs of children are being recognised as part of the Home's responsibility. The point is supported by its organisation of human resource and demarcation of physical space. To begin with, a programme coordinator was appointed to oversee the children's school matters. In running a programme that aims at

holistic development, the coordinator is helped by a pool of volunteers who come in to either provide children with academic guidance or coach them in other areas of interest. Moreover, by making rooms for learning, reading and play, the Home has very much provided a physical environment that caters to the needs of school age children.

Once admitted, children are to expect a drastic change in their social world. What used to be one or two persons' responsibilities are now shared by numerous adults. To name a few: the director plays the role of a decision-maker and disciplinarian, the social workers look into their emotional needs, the programme coordinator dictates their schedule and takes care of school matters, and the housemothers attend to their primary needs as well as supervise their daily chores. Still, there are volunteers who come with a different schedule and agenda. Although the pros and cons of such exposure are not the focus of the study, they probably have an impact on children's school progress.

5.3 Entering the Home

5.3.1 Placement formality

Before placement can be decided, the director and social workers will first interview the clients and conduct an assessment. Gaining an understanding of each other's conditions and expectations is considered fundamental in fostering mutual cooperation. Besides filling in the Admission Coding Form to provide adequate information concerning the child, the applicant (parents or guardians) and the background for placement, applicants are required to sign some documents to pledge their responsibilities. There are three such documents:

Written Contract

The contract has three parts and each is to be filled according to the distinctive needs of individual case:

a. Intervention Plans

b. Types of role/commitment of the Home
c. Types of roles/commitment of the applicant(s).

It is a contract between two parties as both signatures are required on this document. Although there is a column for the projected date of discharge, it is usually left blank. Instead, a half yearly review with the applicant is practised. This review not only assesses the child's progress but also determines the possibility for his/her discharge. If a child is under the Child Protection stipulation, his/her proposed length of stay will be decided by the Care and Protection Officer.

Agreement

The agreement laid down regulations set by the Home concerning an applicant's responsibility in items such as visits, cooperation, medical (*child's medical needs*), payment, termination of stay and indemnity. It is to be signed by the applicant in the presence of the director before placement takes effect. While there are altogether 12 clauses in the agreement, the first stipulates regular visits of the applicant to the child at the Home.

Contract

Different from the written contract, this document serves to absolve the Home's management committee from being responsible in the event of any loss, damage or injury suffered by the child in the Home. It also grants them the rights to act on behalf of the parent or guardian in time of emergencies. Hence, this contract requires only the applicant's signature.

5.3.2 Placement Plan

It is titled 'Total Care Plans of Resident', a recorded assessment of an individual case. It has five parts:

a. Family genogram
b. Presenting problem(s)

c. Assessment of the problem(s)
d. Recommendation of Intervention Plans
e. Outcome(s) (which is to be filled after case closed)

The social worker who makes the assessment and recommendations will sign this document.

Discussion:

The above documents have again confirmed the Home's resolution to safeguard the tie between children and their family members. Parents or guardians are expected to be involved in their children's lives even during placement. Their responsibilities such as visits were duly emphasized.

While assessments are conducted to help the Home decide if placement is the last or best solution for the client at the point of application, the child's educational background and needs are not included in the assessment except for extreme cases whereby professional diagnosis will be sought. According to Tan (2000, p.95), a child was diagnosed to be educationally sub-normal (ESN) before entering the Home. The assessment was carried out by another agency. Since the social workers in the Home were not trained to conduct educational assessments, a personalized educational plan is usually not developed when care plans are drawn up for their clients. The exclusion of an educational plan is likely to have an impact on children's school experience.

5.4 Living in the Home

5.4.1 Routines

Time table

During school term, children follow a structured schedule, which includes a 2-hours' study time in the segment of the day that they are not in school. Besides school-related activities, there are duties to be performed at the Home (*tidy bed, sweep and mop floor,*

wash toilet and put laundry to wash or collect), as well as time for outdoor play and vespers (*Christian Education*). When it comes to school holidays, most children will return home. Those who stay behind will have more free time in their schedule.

Besides daily routines, special events are organized by various voluntary groups for children in the Home. As mentioned, it includes excursions, parties, celebrations, etc. According to the annual reports, such events are rather frequent, especially during school holidays and festive seasons.

When there are celebrations, children are often pampered with presents. As for Christmas, it is not unusual that they receive things like Barbie dolls for the girls and soccer, digital games for the boys. As a result, ordinary stuff like stationery sets are not appreciated (Tan 2000:84).

Practices & Rules

Since the Home was established with a religious emphasis, religious practices are therefore incorporated in its daily routines:

a. Mealtime

Tan (2000:72) provides a vivid description of mealtime. At mealtime, children will gather at the dining hall, pray, and queue for their meals while housemothers serve food onto their plates. The Home's staff do not usually join them for meals except for the housemothers who will have theirs at a separate table. When eating, children are not allowed to talk or leave food uneaten. They must finish their meals within half an hour so that housemothers can clean up the place.

b. Vespers

Every evening, after dinner, there is a half an hour *devotion time* (vespers). It is either conducted by the programme coordinator or some church groups. During this

time, all children, regardless of their religious background, will be asked to participate. They will pray, sing and learn about the Christian teachings.

c. Lights Off

As was found by Tan (2000:80), this is the time when children, especially the new comers and younger ones, feel vulnerable. To ease their fear, older girls are given the responsibility of caring for them. That explains why all children below six, including boys, sleep in the girls' dormitory. On the other hand, it is also a time of power tussles between staff and children. Getting these children to stop talking and playing can be a challenging task.

5.4.2 Discipline

Children who have broken rules will be disciplined according to the severity of the offences. Disciplinary measures are made clear to them before execution. For example, those who talk when eating will have 10 cents deducted from their pocket money; those who are late for meals will be asked to stand in the hall; those who do not sleep when lights are out will stand outside the office; etc. For more serious cases, such as fighting, stealing and jumping on beds, caning is meted out to the offender but the right to cane is reserved for the director and programme coordinator. A maximum of 2 strokes is to be observed. When there are complaints from school, it is usually handled by the programme coordinator.

The forms of discipline prohibited by the MCD's 1999 Guidelines include:

a. Degrading punishment;
b. Punitive work assignment;
c. Group punishment;
d. Extended isolation of child; and
e. Deprivation of resident's rights and needs.

Corporal punishment such as caning is not one of them. It is considered as an acceptable disciplinary act in the local context.

5.4.3 Education

Most of the children are attending primary school in the vicinity of the Home. This perhaps is to make travelling more convenient. In the search for the Home's perspectives on children's education, the following lines are found in the annual reports (*the italic forms are my emphasis*):

1999 – "*The challenges ahead include helping children to overcome their learning difficulties* and to nurture supportive family relationships that would enable them to live together in harmony one day." (4)

1999 - "*As such, most of our children have experienced some emotional disturbances and have a lower self-esteem which affects their learning and social skills.*" (12)

2000 – "In the coming year, *the Home aims to equip parents and volunteers with the necessary skills to meet the emotional and educational needs of the children.*" (4)

2001 – "*The Home aims to break the cycle of parents sending their children to residential homes in future by emphasizing education,* personal responsibility and inculcating the right moral and spiritual values in the children and by encouraging their parents to do likewise." (5)

Discussion:

Apparently, placement is associated with a totally different life experience for these children: a pool of surrogate parents, a form of institutional living and a schedule that is structured and routine. Although social workers are there to help them deal with their personal problems, little has been said about how these children are helped to adjust to the new environment. As they are now required to set off to school each day from an institution, school must have taken on a very different meaning altogether. On the other hand, though special programmes and presents may have helped improve the quality of

institutional living, their potential impact on children's adjustment and development is yet to be discovered.

With respect to education, when the above perspectives were penned, they were often linked to children's learning difficulties. The causes for such difficulties are mainly attributed to their traumatic background and lack of effective help from parents and volunteers. The solution is therefore to upgrade the skills of these people. An interesting point raised would be the recognition of education as an important factor that could prevent children repeating family history. This is indeed a likely consequence found by scholars when the education of looked after children is neglected (*see 2.2*). It is also part of the arguments for the significance of the issue (*see 1.5.2*).

5.5 Conclusion

Besides providing care and protection to needy children, it is evident that the Home also aims at introducing interventions that will ultimately help build up families. The goal is to have children maintaining a positive relationship with family members and so, on one hand, families are instructed to play an active role in their placement, on the other, they are to be changed for the better.

Comparatively speaking, a lesser emphasis is placed on children's educational needs. Although such needs are being addressed through the Home's structure, daily operation and annual reports, specific plans to redress looked after children's disadvantage in learning are not available.

Furthermore, institutionalised living does set the children apart from their past as well as peers in school. Their world is now made up of a multiplicity of adults, children with similar fates and activities. The impact of such changes is not known but it certainly does not have to be all bad. With more adults involved in their lives may mean having greater freedom to go to the one whom they could identify with. Their fears and loneliness are likely to find comfort from peers in the Home. As we look at children's perspectives of

schools in the next chapter, an understanding of their Home experience will be helpful in making sense of certain aspects.

Chapter Six: Children's Perspectives I

School – the Centre of Normalization

This and the following chapter aim at presenting the perspectives of children in respect to their schools and the Residential Home as a centre for school support. The findings were the results of two channels of data collection, the interviews and questionnaire survey, as explicated in the chapter of methodology (*see 3.3.3 and 3.3.5*). Although the two instruments had very different approaches and purposes, they were used to complement each other so that a fuller and more substantiated study would be possible. Ultimately, the unfolding of the subsequent perspectives works towards answering the following research questions:

1. *What have the children experienced in school?*
2. *How do they feel about these experiences?*
3. *To what extent are the children's experiences and feelings related to their background?*

To distinguish the sources of data, the word *interviewee* is used to refer to the participant in the interviews and *respondent* the participant in the questionnaire survey. When a dialogue from the interviews is cited, the interviewee's pseudo name, class level and line number on the transcript would be stated to allow quick reference.

The focus of this chapter is on those perspectives that feature school and school life. Besides home, school is another prominent centre that exerts great influence on children's development. As mentioned in Chapter 1 (*see 1.4.1*), Primary School children spend at least half a day in school and another half in school related activity. As such, school does more than educating the young minds and equipping them with skills for future livelihood. Through a myriad of activities and relations, children are placed within a socio-cultural network, which is significant in moulding their self-concept, practices and values, and connects them to the society at large. Candidly put by Jamrozik & Sweeney (1996:139), "It is the school system which plays a very significant role in the child's learning, socialization, and future place in society."

School experience is therefore an important process with enduring impact in the lives of many looked after children. While their family background and placement at the residential Home may be atypical, school provides a platform where normalcy with the majority could be experienced. This study aims at uncovering looked after children's perspectives of their school experience. Six themes were developed as explained in Chapter 3 (*see 3.4.2*) and they comprise their positive and negative feelings towards school, relationship with teachers and classmates, experience of school transfer and comprehension of school value. Given the school context, it is possible that much of the experiences and feelings shared by the participants could have also been shared by children who had never been in care. This should not come as a surprise since looked after children are in many ways comparable to their peers and it is only reasonable for us to try to understand them as an independent entity rather than in comparison to their peers. That said, it is also true that, as much as possible, the perspectives presented in this chapter ought to be explained in relation to the participants' unique background in order to make the study significant. After all, understanding the impact of placement on their perspectives of school is the fundamental goal of the study.

6.1 Feeling positive about school

When asked about school, it was found that a majority of the interviewees had something positive to say (the ratio of positive statements as against negative statements was 3.3 to 1). Some did it in a personal response such as *I like,* others provided an adjective to illustrate their feelings like *fun, nice.* Still, there were those who made direct references to its specific constituents, for example *programme* and *people.* This positive result was resonated by the outcome of the survey (*see Table 6.1_Q1*). In the search for factors that draw children to school, it was discovered that only 10 persons had selected just half or less items out of the 18 listed in the survey for their answers. Conversely, at least three quarters of the respondents had selected more than 9 items that served as pull factors for them. The value of school was certainly appreciated by these participants in various ways according to their needs and aspirations. Here are the main aspects mentioned:

Table 6.1_Q1

Things I like about School

Child	Pl	Rc	Fd	Clb	PE	ML	AL	CL	Exc	Eng	MT	Mth	Scn	Hw	Cl	Fr	Tr	Pr	No. of pick	Others
025	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	18	
027	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	18	library (computer/books)
015	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	17	soccer tournaments
041	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	x	1	1	1	1	1	17	
031	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	16	
033	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	x	1	1	1	1	1	16	library (computer/books)
034	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	x		1	1	1	1	16	library (computer/books)
016	1	1	1		1		1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	15	
038	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	x	1		1	1	1	15	(no friends)
021	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	x	1	1		1	1	1		1		1	14	(no computer lesson)
032	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1			1	x	1	1	1	1	1	14	library (books)
009	1	1		1	1		1	1	1			1		1	1	1	1	1	13	Classroom-big,nice décor
028	1	1		1	1	1	1	1		1		1		1	1	1	1		13	
011		1		1			1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	12	Provide a place for LAC
022		1		1	1		1	1		1	1	1	1	1			1	1	12	Chapel
030	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1		1	1					1	12	computer lab
039	1	1		1	1		1	1	1			1	x		1	1	1	1	12	
005	1			1	1			1				1	1	1	1	1	1	1	11	friends' family members
007		1		1	1			1	1	1			1		1	1	1	1	11	
012	1	1	1	1				1	1			1	1	1	1	1			11	
014	1			1	1			1	1		1	1			1	1	1	1	11	CCA
017	1	1					1	1	1	1		1		1	1	1	1		11	Studies
029	1	1		1	1	1		1		1		1	1				1	1	11	library (books)
040	1			1	1	1	1	1	1			1	x		1	1		1	11	Group work
036				1	1			1	1		1	1	x	1	1	1	1	1	11	
002		1			1		1			1	1	1	1		1	1	1		10	
018	1	1	1	1	1			1	1			1		1		1			10	
019		1	1		1			1	1			1			1	1	1	1	10	
020				1	1			1		1	1	1	1			1	1	1	10	
024		1			1		1	1	1			1	1	1		1	1		10	
035	1		1		1				1			1	1		1	1	1	1	10	
004	1			1	1			1	1		1				1	1	1		9	
037	1	1			1			1		1			x	1	1	1	1		9	
013	1	1			1		1	1	1							1		1	8	
023						1	1	1		1			1		1	1	1		8	School librarian
001	1			1				1	1	1					1	1			7	
010		1					1	1				1		1			1	1	7	
026	1				1						1				1		1	1	6	
003		1						1		1	1						1		5	Go Home
008		1			1			1				1			1				5	library (computer)
006	1				1														2	
	29	29	16	27	33	14	23	36	27	23	15	31	17	22	29	33	32	28		

**Activities*: *Pl=Play; Rc=Recess; Fd=Food; Clb=Celebrations;* <u>*Enrichment*</u>*: PE=Physical education; ML=Music Lessons; AL=Arts Lessons; CL=Computer Lessons; Exc=Excursions;* <u>*Academics*</u>*: Eng=English; MT=Mother Tongue; Mth=Maths; Hw=Homework; Scn=Science;* <u>*People*</u>*: Cl=Classmates; Fr=Friends; Tr=Teachers; Pr=Principal.*

6.1.1 Opportunity to play and socialize

Benny (P5): (4) Fun Nice (23) play, PE, Recess time (26) Play soccer (33) [Q: like going to school?] Yes.

Play, Physical Education (PE) and *Recess* were three most talked about happy occasions in school. While *play* often took place during *PE* and *Recess*, the three aspects were likely to have their own appeals. As it could be seen in *Table 6.1_Q1*, not all who have chosen one picked the other.

Play, as described by the interviewees, usually took place during *Recess*, a daily school break (usually 30 minutes) given to children in between of classes. Whether their *play* came in the form of games, sports, tomfooleries or doing things with friends, it "is characterized by its apparent lack of serious purpose or immediate goal" (Pellegrini & Smith 2005:14). This, in the view of Ashley (2004), resonates with children's inherent needs for space to engage in their own activities. Recess being a time unfettered by authorities is indeed a haven for these recreational and spontaneous activities.

Rachel (P2): (131) Play with them [friends] and sing song... we usually play catching at the multi, multipurpose court and buy some, some cake food to eat and buy some rings. Sometime, Monday and Wednesday, we will go to the... library and bookshop to borrow books and buy some, buy stationery.

Rick (P3): (35) Recess (560) Ah, every time, Recess time, my friend right, will dance the, don't know what dance, then he say loh loh loh loh loh (566) Ya, very funny er.

Play could have also taken place during *PE* in the minds of some children. *PE* is a time for children to engage in physical activity, which not only is crucial to their physical health, but also their sense of self-worth and social skills in getting along with others (Dunlap 2002). Unlike Recess, it is often structured and supervised. The following is an excerpt of a dialogue with a P6 boy (line number 24-29) with regard to his *PE* lessons:

Interviewer: Okay, and what do you like best?
Steve: PE
Interviewer: PE time. Oh, what do you do during PE?
Steve: Play ah.
Interviewer: Besides play
Steve: Nothing.

Judging by the participants' interest in the period, many must have agreed with this boy in that physical activities were in practice a form of *play* and so the lesson that offered such opportunity was highly embraced.

The importance of *play* in children's life is beyond contention. Not only has *play* been recognized as a natural tendency for children of any age, gender, cultural background, socio-economic circumstances, abilities, or level of development, its value has also been established given that "self directed play is a deeply satisfying emotional, cognitive and physical experience for most children and one from which they draw an intrinsic motivation to learn about and engage with the world" (Zigler et al 2004:v). In short, *play* serves to develop children's cognitive, social and emotional domains (Hetherington & Parke 1999).

Children however do not necessarily engage in play for its ultimate benefits as mentioned above. More often than not, to qualify it as an element that made school life interesting, *play* was to be carried out in the company of peers. The proposition is supported by the fact that play was often mentioned jointly with the identification of playmates and play activities which involved friends. It is believed that the added dimension provides an opportunity for these children to socialize as well as define themselves based on their position in a peer group (Greenspan 1993). Consequently, be it active or sedentary, physical or social, *play* is meaningful as it fosters a sense of inclusion in a peer group. Children in residential care are said to run the risk of being insulated from the community, and that makes personal space and play all the more important for them (Ashley 2004). On the same note, *playing* in school is considered to have both social and emotional value for looked after children.

On the other hand, the survey has shown that more respondents in the upper primary actually prefer *Recess* to *play*, in contrast to the lower primary. Besides being a time for

unstructured and unsupervised *play*, *Recess* also permits other freewill activities to take place, for instance eating at the canteen, talking to friends, visiting the library and bookshop or even reading alone, within the school compound. The result was likely induced by the effect of maturation. It has been proposed that children in middle childhood are likely to spend more time getting to know their peers and themselves through interactions (Rubin et al 2005), and develop a predilection for autonomy (Greenspan 1993). Given that they were usually *homebound* outside school hours (when children were asked to name the decision makers if they wished to go out with friends in the survey, many said that they were not supposed to do so), *Recess* became a golden opportunity for developing personal relationships.

A comparison was also drawn between *Recess* and mealtime at the Home since both occasions were carried out in a group setting. At the Home, children were told not to talk and finish all that is in their plates within a stipulated time (*see 5.4.1a*). Such rules (except for finishing within a time frame) were not imposed in the school canteen. Generally, children enjoyed a greater freedom in the choice of food and activity during *Recess*. The differing experiences of the two settings were remarkable. They could well be part of the reasons why this period of school was so well liked, as demonstrated by the following quotation:

Cheryl (P2): (9) I like my school because my school give me Recess.

6.1.2 Opportunity to learn

Rachel (P2): (11) I like school because can study more about... things.

Learning is an essential part of schooling and children are said to have a natural desire to learn (Dunlap 2002). Yet, few interviewees had made specific reference to any academic subjects (i.e. English, Mother Tongue and Mathematics and Science) when learning was discussed. It was through the questionnaire survey (*see Table 6.1_Q1*) that the latent interest transpired. An assessment of the data reveals that more than half of the respondents had picked 2 or more subjects as things they liked about school and

Mathematics was the most popular of the four subjects, acquiring a result that surpassed even *Celebrations* and *Excursions*.

Learning was also mentioned several times when respondents were asked to complete the sentence that begins with *School will be a more enjoyable place if* (see *Table 6.2_Q10*). Their statements were marked by a desire to learn more and to learn in a varied way as suggestions were made for classes to be conducted outside the regular classrooms and the use of activities and movies as a means of instruction.

Table 6.2_Q10
School will be a more enjoyable place if

Facility	Programme	Teachers	Collective actions	Peers	Personal actions
*there are shopping centres in school so that can save money and buy things I want. *a swimming pool	*I learn more things (3) and new things. *there are more interesting thing to learn	*teachers are not so fierce at times. *there are more friendly and patient teachers	*we listen to our teachers in class (2) *we co-operate with our teachers and staff, obey them, do not break rules, and respect the staff *respect teachers	*no irritating people *no gangsters *nobody beat me *my classmates and teachers like me more, they can change not to call me gay.	*I study hard
*every class has an air-con (2) *there is air-con	*learning is not only in the classroom but also in the computer lab, park and even the neighbourhood *there are more shows *there are more activities (Maths, English, Social studies, Health Education)	*teachers can teach me a lot of things and encourage me	*everyone learns to obey the rules *most of us do not cause trouble *do not quarrel (3) and make so much noise *we don't fight (2) *they cooperate with each other	*I have more friends (2) *I make new friends *there is someone who will always care about me *you can borrow colour pencils from your friends	*I do not quarrel with people *I am a good boy
*there are more physical space for everyone *school is bigger *bigger canteen and computer lab	*recess is longer *have a lot of play time *we get to play	*My teachers do not wrongly accuse me	*it is quiet *children are quiet *be quiet when teachers are talking	*all Home children go to my school	*I go school feeling happy
	*less homework (2)		*pupils do not litter in school (2)		
	*school hour is longer *has more CCA		*we do not anyhow take things from people *ask permission		
			*we study hard (4)		
			*we like the school very much		

**() indicates number of times mentioned*

The finding was in fact consistent with developmental theory. Piaget has spoken at length about children's need to explore their environment and discover things themselves (Dunlap 2002) and Erikson has labelled the years between 6 and 12 to be the stage of industry versus inferiority in his psychosocial stages of development. Children in this stage are said to be able to initiate activities, learn new things and set goals as they try to make contribution to their social group (*ibid.*).

The fact that children possess a predisposition to learn as well as to initiate learning could perhaps help to explain why programmes that employ interactive instructional approaches are comparatively more popular than those that adopt direct instructional approach. Here are some examples of the interviewees' feedback

Serena (P6): (71) Then I enjoy the computer lesson in school... then... like sometimes in school right, they have those learning journey, like excursion, like just recently I went to China town, India and to the Singapore River for a boat ride. So, I enjoy things like that.

Jenny (P5): (75) Best about school, music and computer. Still got one more, art (79) [Q: like going to school?] A bit

Structurally, *Learning journeys, Computer, Music and Arts Lessons* are different from academic subjects in two respects. First, their contents rely heavily on stimulus, participation and, to some extent, creativity on the part of the facilitator and learner. Next, being non-academic subjects in the local Primary Schools, they are either not graded or their grades have no significance in students' GPA. As a result, learning in these contexts hinges on one's participation and thus is low risk.

Few respondents would object to the appeal of *Computer Lessons.* As one of the 18 items in the questionnaire survey (*see Table 6.1_Q1*), it has received the highest number of picks. Besides the nature of the programme, the lesson often took place in a room that was fitted with air-conditioning and cushioned chairs. Such investment was representative of the government's resolution in raising a generation of IT (Information Technology) savvy workforce. In fact, the Ministry of Education has launched its

Masterplan for IT in Education back in 1997. The plan sets out to ensure that by 2002, "all primary schools will be provided with the hardware and software required to allow IT-based learning for 10% of the total curriculum time" (MOE Press Release 015/97, 28 April 1997). Ultimately, "the aim is for every child to be proficient in the use of computers, and to benefit from learning in an IT-enriched environment" (MOE Press Release 01601, 8 March 2001). As a result of these commitments, not only were the children taught to use computers early in life, projects that require the use of computers are just part and parcel of their school curriculum.

Furthermore, the computer has also become a more common household apparatus. The report on consumer durables in households (The Singapore Department of Statistics 2003) has attested to the growth of personal computer (PCs) ownership from 20 per cent in 1992 to about 65 per cent in 2002. Even low income families could have been helped by the Ministry of Education and other charitable societies through the donation of used PCs (MOE Press Release 01601, 8 March 2001). Such convenience of access however was not always available at the Home. Since the beginning of the research, the computer room was closed due to restructuring of the site and construction work (*see 5.2.4*). It had yet to be refurbished when data collection reached its final stage, which was more than one and a half years later.

Finally, what came as a surprise was the bleak performance of 'Music Lessons' among the upper primary as only 1 out of 22 considered it to be likable. A possible explanation is found in the shift of curriculum emphasis from lower to upper primary. As it was mentioned in Chapter 1 *(see 1.4.1),* primary school students have to sit for two streaming examinations, one in P4 and another P6. The onus to prepare upper primary students for these examinations was likely to have caused the non-academic subject to suffer. If this is the case, constant drilling and more homework are to be expected for these students. The negative effects of the humdrum would be seen in the next theme: children's voices of dissatisfaction.

Without a question, learning is natural to children regardless of their background. Interest for learning can be sustained by the method of instruction especially if it is designed to meet their developmental needs. School is crucial to looked after children as

it provides a repertoire of experiences that are significant for their cognitive as well as social development. Through participation, they would be better connected to their peers as well as the society. In this sense, school is a neutral agency that can help normalize their lives. The Home, on the other hand, is to play its role to provide the necessary facilities to ensure such success.

6.1.3 Opportunity to relate

Jareth (P4): (14) very kind. (23) My form teacher and my school teachers

Besides the curriculum, people in school make up another major aspect that has a great impact on children's feelings of school. These people are the school personnel and their peers. The importance of this aspect is reflected in the questionnaire survey. Of the various themes that came under the question on things they like about school, *People* had received the highest number of agreement (*see Table 6.1_Q1*).

'School personnel' refers to the adults in authority, namely the principal and teachers. These people appear to be symbolic of school as direct references were made to them when the question was actually about their schools. Like the above quotation, adjectives such as 'very kind' and 'very good' were used to describe schools when the speakers were in fact thinking about the personnel.

According to research, teacher-student relationships can be a useful indicator for the affective value of school (Ireson & Hallam 2005). This relationship is largely founded on a teacher's willingness to offer support to their student's learning. The following input gives a pertinent description of what a teacher can do to improve the quality of school life:

Serena (P6): (34) if there is any problem in school, my teacher will help, or she will get someone to talk to me and try and help me sort things out, then, ah I just enjoy school lah

While teachers play an instrumental role in their students' sense of belonging to school, such a role is believed to be even more significant to the looked after children. As the subject of teachers in the views of looked after children is to be dealt with at a greater length in a later theme (*see 6.3*), it is perhaps sufficient to say here that the claim is partly inferred from a finding established by Hamre & Pianta (2005). In researching a group of grade one students at risk of school failure, they have found that teachers who provide strong instructional and emotional support are capable of helping these children achieve remarkable improvement. As found in the preliminary findings of this study, the majority of the population belong to the underachieving group (*see 4.3.3*). Their reliance on teachers for school progress is therefore likely to be more acute than their peers.

Jareth (P4): (31) I like to go to school because I have many friends to play with me, I can talk to them, I can share my feelings.

Peers are also a major part of school's social world. In fact, the findings of the questionnaire survey has shown that while more children from the lower primary had identified *Teachers* as opposed to *Friends* to be the thing they like in school, it is the other way round for those in the upper primary (*see Table 6.1_Q1*). The shift of emotional bonds from *Teachers* to *Friends* is unsurprising as it has been found that children tend to move from an adult-focused orientation to a peer-focused orientation as they approach adolescence (Lynch & Cicchetti 1997).

If teachers are the signposts in school, peers are companions whom they tread the path with. Peers by and large differ from school personnel as they meet a different set of needs children have. Peer interaction signifies the presence of companionship, affection and amusement and has long been recognized to be crucial in children's development (Maxwell 1990:170). Some candid responses from the interviewees help to illustrate the point:

Monica (P3): (39) Can make friends, can have friends. (65) Fun.

Serena (P6): (32) Then like, in school I have a lot of friends, I'm not feeling bored. Then, I learn to communicate with people well. Um, then like. (66) and my friends, like,

everyday I'm going to school and I'm seeing them, then sometime I am very happy, because like when it's our birthday, our friends give us something, or they make a card or give us a (71) present.

Friends are the important sub-category of peers. With younger children, perhaps having friends simply meant having playmates so that life could be more interesting. The existence of friends becomes more consequential when children move into their middle childhood. As research has found, friendship changes during this period of time; having friends also meant having someone to talk to, share their feelings and interests with, and pick up behavioural norms (Rubin et al 2005).

All in all, the importance of having peers/friends ties in well with their likings of *Recess* and *Physical Education* as they offer opportunities for them to mingle with people they like. For a fuller understanding, the notion of peers and friendship in school will be expounded further in a later theme *(see 6.4)*.

6.1.4 Conclusion

This section makes it clear that the appeal of school is multifaceted. Whether it is the programme or the people, school offers various services that will help satisfy the different needs of a growing child. More importantly, it provides looked after children an opportunity to have a part of their life normalized. Once they are in school, they share the same experiences as their peers do. Through participation, they would be better connected to their peers as well as the society. This is believed to be essential to start them on the path to future social integration.

For this reason, playing and learning are likely to mean more to this group of children. As they play, they place themselves within a social group, and as they learn, they stand a chance for a better education or career in future. This may be necessary if they wish to avert their family plight. Thus, if such an opportunity is matched with enthusiasm, their hard work is going to pay off in not just the school grade, but also future development.

However, many of these children will not make it on their own. They need teachers and friends to improve the quality of their school life. Teachers are important resources, especially in times when professional help is needed. Friends are great companions for growth and development. The residential home, on the other hand, is to play its supportive role to ensure such success. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

Finally, school is not without problems. A fraction of the interviewees had described school as boring. Problems with school expectations were also brought up spontaneously without the researcher's initiation. Although these complaints were relatively less than the positive affirmations, they are to be represented here so as a more complete picture could be presented with regard to looked after children's perspectives of school.

6.2 Voices of dissatisfaction

Having looked at the positive aspects of school according to the perspectives of most children, we will now examine the things that were found to be objectionable for some children. Their complaints comprise boredom in school, too much homework and teachers are "too fierce". These are all problems that have their roots in the role expectations of a school. Role expectations, as defined by Robertson (1987:92), are the generally accepted social norms that prescribe how a role ought to be played. As students, the social norms for acceptable behaviour in school would be likely to include attentiveness in class, completion of homework and respect of school regulations. When these expectations clash with the individual's personality and willingness to conform, problems arise.

6.2.1 Problems with boredom

Wilson (P4): (25) Um, not so much because go to school very boring.

It is noteworthy that children who had thought school was boring were predominantly boys. As a matter of fact, 4 of the ten male interviewees shared the feeling. The reasons for their boredom were either not mentioned or vaguely stated. It was found that the

negative assertion was made despite the fact that they had peers to play with and a good principal and teachers to relate to. What stood out from these cases was the apparent gender bias. Besides, they consisted of 2 pairs of interviewees and so peer influence might be at play. The following quotation is an example of such case. The boy had started by describing school as fun and nice, but soon after his partner said that school was boring, he was quick to add in his agreement:

Benny (P5): (8) I, I, I feel a bit boring lah, don't, I don't like studies.

It also appeared that boredom was expressed when school was conceptualised as a place for study. For someone who did not think he liked studies, schooling understandably became a chore. This feeling, however, had nothing to do with their academic ability or conduct in school. An investigation into their track records found that a couple of these boys had actually done well in both areas.

Likewise, those who have identified learning as a positive feature of school, during the interviews, were all girls. While girls had appeared to be more ready to embrace school than boys, they were not found to be doing better in their academic performance in the preliminary finding (*see 4.3.2*). The incongruity confirms the earlier inference that school feeling does not always correlate with academic ability.

The difference between girls' and boys' feelings towards school could be a result of the way primary schools were shaped. Early school experience has long been thought to be developmentally more suited to girls than boys as it is primarily taught by female teachers who are disposed to reward compliant behaviour (Brannon 1996). While the local primary schools are known to be academically competitive with heavy deskbound work, especially in the upper primary, the outcome does point to the fact that it may be a challenge to boys who are used to rough-and tumble play. Besides, Cole et al's (1999) findings have led them to conclude that boys tend to overestimate their own academic competence. This may raise the question of whether the feeling of dullness also stemmed from their misplaced confidence. Whatever the case may be, individualized guidance appears to be the call to help boys cope with school demands.

6.2.2 Problems with homework

Rick (P3): (20) So many homework to do.

Since academic work is at the heart of the school experience (Eccles & Roeser 2005:516), the interview schedule was set to find out children's perspectives concerning *homework*. The purpose was to find out whether they encounter difficulties in meeting the requirements. The subject, nevertheless, was brought up by some interviewees as their response to the question on school. Below is another such example:

Serena (P6): (77) Ya, I like going to school, but sometimes like I feel a bit tired you know every time going to school and then so restless and sometimes, especially homework, I get a lot of homework, so, but I like school a lot because of my friends and everything. But things to do with homework, then I not really like school.

When children raised the subject of *homework*, it was more often than not, a cause for dissatisfaction. Their gripes usually hinge on the amount that was given to them, not their inability to execute the work. It was understood that the Home had a daily schedule for *homework* to be done and assistance could be sought from either the voluntary tutors or staff during this period of time (*see 5.4.1*). Perhaps, this was the reason why *homework* was not shunned by everyone. As a matter of fact, the survey has shown that at least half of the population considered having *homework* to be one of the factors they liked about school (*see Table 6.1_Q1*).

In short, *homework* itself is apparently not the problem but the amount children get each day. Indeed, having too much of it runs the risk of undermining the pleasure of learning. On the other hand, the fact that the Home has provisions for meeting the demands of school is believed to be a remarkable diversion for most of the participants from their experiences at home. The subject will be taken up again in the next chapter with the focus on children's perspectives concerning Home's effectiveness in meeting school requirements.

6.2.3 Problem with insensitive teachers

Terry (P4): (82) Um, um, my teacher always give me a lot of homework. And shout at us, and scold us.

Besides boredom and too much homework, another area of dissatisfaction was expressed against those in authority. Teachers' attitudes were being mentioned not only in the interviews but also the survey. Here are some opinions as to what will make school a more enjoyable place (*see Table 6.2_Q10*):

P5G: if teachers are not so fierce at times.
P3G: there are more friendly and patient teachers
P5B: teachers can teach me a lot of things and encourage me
P4B: My teachers do not wrongly accuse me

Whether they were expressed in the negative or positive stance, the yearning for a more understanding, approachable teacher is evident in these statements. When *fierce* was used to describe the teacher, it was often coupled with a portrayal of his/her action, for example *using the long ruler and bang on the table*, *scolding*, *shouting*, or feeling, for example *anger*. Nonetheless, not all episodes of anger were judged to be a teacher's problem. Some of these children were able to distinguish them as independent incidents in response to a certain cause and were not affected:

Jacintha (P5): (28) My teacher ah, sometimes he very fierce, because if we noisy, he cannot control, he will shout. [Q: Any problem?] No, because I didn't do anything

Apart from teachers' anger, there were a number who had felt that they were over-disciplined or wrongly accused. Here, a P3 boy resented his principal for canning him on account of what appeared to be a prank:

Leslie (P3): (90) I also don't like principal. Principal cane me before you know. (95) ... that time I put the box on my head only leh, (113) I feel like whacking him.

Pianta & Walsh (1996), in highlighting the importance of healthy teacher-child relationships, cited Boyer's 1983 work as it has established that a supportive teacher is a major factor associated with prevention of dropouts. Such a relationship is said to be especially critical for students who have experienced considerable relationship stress: for example, divorce, child maltreatment, or parental depression. By and large, children in care are people who fit into this category. Their needs for positive input from school personnel are unquestionable. Since children's perspectives of school personnel will be dealt with in the next section, there is no need to go further here than stating the fact that dissatisfaction with school personnel could end up jeopardizing looked after children's motivation to learn

6.2.4 Conclusion

Children's dissatisfactions as presented in this section are mainly findings from the interviews. The survey had invited respondents to give suggestion as to what would make school a more enjoyable place. Besides those quoted above, issues involved facilities (*e.g. air-conditioning*) and more responsible actions from peers (*e.g. obeying school regulations*) were raised (*see Table 6.2_Q10*), but were excluded in the presentation as they were not perceived as dissatisfaction but factors that would help improve school environment. Statements which have to do with their longing for better peer relationships will be covered in the section on getting along with classmates (*see 6.4*).

In reviewing children's dissatisfactions, it was discovered that more boys than girls were having difficulty in embracing school. While an attempt has been made to cast their differences as gender issue, it cannot be conclusive as the population in this study is small, not to mention that the contrastive framework was said to have outlived its usefulness as it largely neglects within-gender variation (Thorne 2002). Thus, it is sufficient to suggest individualized help for boys to cope with school. On the other hand, although there were complaints on the amount of *homework* being dished out to them, attitudes toward the subject were divided among participants. Insofar as these children were properly supported by a structured schedule and a pool of mentors, *homework* need not be shunned. Finally, dislike of school personnel due to their temperament or specific

actions were reported. While children in residential care are thought to have a greater need for educational support (Golding et al 2006), the aversion is likely to hurt any prospect of quality guidance from these teachers.

On the surface, these voices of dissatisfaction were so general that they could hardly be attributed to participants' placement background. Yet, if the afore-section has any success in reiterating the significant role that school plays in their lives (*see 6.1*), factors that hinder healthy attachment would have to be viewed as detrimental to their life chances. The difference between looked after children and children who are not in care is that the latter usually have their parents to turn to for support and solutions. Under the charge of public care, looked after children rely on the institutions, the Home as well as the school, to take proactive actions towards their educational problems.

6.3 Teachers' attributes and roles

Factors pertaining to the importance of teacher-student relationships were being discussed in the earlier sections. What transpired from these discussions was the potential influence of a teacher's attitude on his/her students' sense of belonging in school and future development. Given its significance, this section highlights the resourcefulness of school personnel, primarily teachers, as shared by the participants. The theme is sub-divided into two broad sections, with the first focusing on what had been perceived as teacher's attributes, and the second on the various endeavours of teachers in sustaining a personal touch.

6.3.1 Attributes that attract

Willie (P5): (41) Very caring lah (58) Caring, kind, responsibility, helpful, kind.

We shall begin with the kind of attributes teachers possessed in building rapport with their students. Students' receptivity of a teacher was found to be spawned by a great variety of reasons. *Kind* was the word most frequently used by interviewees to describe the teachers they like. Other adjectives that share the same connotation were *good, nice,*

patient, caring, helpful and *understanding*. Many of these qualities were incorporated in one of the questionnaire's question concerning the things they like about their teachers. The statistics have shown that being *friendly* topped the list of teachers' attributes *(see Table 6.3_Q2)*. Nonetheless, the upper primary differs from their younger peers by putting *kind* above the rest whilst fewer would describe their teachers as *understanding*. *Caring* comes under *friendly* and *kind* to be the third attribute their teachers have exemplified.

An interesting discovery is the high representation of physical attractiveness in the interviews as well as survey *(see Table 6.3_Q2)*. While *pretty* was used a few times to describe their female teachers in the interviews, respondents in the survey would add in *handsome* to describe their male teachers. The magnetic power of looks was especially vivid in the case of a lady teacher whose student (a P2 girl) had proudly based her liking on the fact that she was pretty and kind. Coincidentally, a P5 girl had also named the same teacher as her favourite teacher even though she was not taught by her. They met in the school premises and the girl was presumably drawn by her good looks and friendliness. Here is the excerpt from the interviews:

Jazreel (P5): We just smile at each other, then we know each other lah.
Interviewer: Why do you like her?
Jazreel (P5): Because she very kind. She very pretty

While physical attractiveness is evidently an added value in teacher student relations, the above example has also shown that it is not all that it takes. The presence of other attributes like *friendliness* and *kindness* is also important if rapport is to be built.

Table 6.3_Q2

Things I like about my teachers

Child	Pretty	Kind	Caring	Under-standing	Friendly	Funny	Attend to my needs	Teach me many things	Reward me for good result/ behaviour	Encourage me to work harder	Others
001									1	1	
002		1		1				1	1	1	
003	1	1	1	1	1		1			1	
004		1	1		1		1	1		1	
005		1	1	1	1		1	1		1	
006	1	1	1		1	1			1	1	
007			1		1			1		1	make lesson interesting
008		1	1		1				1	1	
009		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	(praise)	1	Handsome
010	1			1				1		1	
011		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	underweight-encourage me, give personal tuition
012	1	1			1			1		1	
013	1	1	1					1	1	1	
014				1		1	1			1	tell a lot of jokes
015	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	celebrate birthdays
016	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	
017		1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	help get more knowledge
018	1	1			1	1		1	1		
019		1	1		1			1	1	1	
020		1	1	1				1		1	
021											
022	1	1	1		1	1	1	1		1	help me buy things,eg. Art materials/reference bks/cut hair, school pocket money
P4-6	**9**	**17**	**15**	**11**	**15**	**7**	**10**	**16**	**11**	**20**	
023			1	1	1		1	1	1	1	
024		1	1				1	1	1	1	
025	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
026	1			1	1				1	1	
027		1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	Handsome
028	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	
029				1	1	1	1	1	1	1	Handsome
030				1		1		1	1	1	
031		1			1	1		1	1	1	Handsome
035				1	1	1		1	1	1	
032						1			1		let me do anything I like
033	1	1	1		1			1	1	1	
034	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
039	1	1	1	1				1		1	
040		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
041	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	
036		1		1	1			1	1	1	
037		1	1	1	1			1	1	1	
038	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	healthy/strong
P1-3	**8**	**13**	**12**	**15**	**15**	**9**	**10**	**17**	**18**	**18**	

Finally, the way teachers conducted their classes could also steer their students' perception of them. Those who were thought of favourably by their students were either flexible in implementing the programme (*such as showing movie in class, allowing an earlier dismissal for recess, etc*) or able to pepper the lessons with jokes. This finding may be illustrative of what Pianta (1999:42) has advocated: children tend to benefit from teachers who were flexible enough to "respond to a wide range of contextual conditions and internal pressures". Students' temperament, concentration span and intellectual ability are all part of these conditions and by making adjustment accordingly, teachers could invariably improve the learning environment for their learners.

6.3.2 Roles that endure

Primary school teachers were known to wear many hats and these could include friend, protector, mentor, disciplinarian, and gatekeeper to academic success (Davis 2001:431). This section presents the various roles that were taken on by teachers and had effected positive change in the lives of looked after children. Four such roles have been identified and they are: motivator, facilitator, carer and provider.

Sam (P2): (63) Because when my...exam pass, he'll help me buy thing (67) Ah, Piggy Bank

Teachers who see that their responsibilities go beyond the delivery of contents are likely to resort to various strategies in support of their students learning as well as achievement. *Rewards* are just one type of motivational strategies, which is commonly used by teachers as a bait to get their students to strive for better results. In the case of the above quotation, they were also used as a means of feedback by the authority to encourage achievers to continue their good work.

Rewards, however, were largely practised by teachers of the younger age group. As it was shown in the survey, almost all of the lower primary respondents had teachers who would reward them for good result and behaviour but only a quarter of the upper primary shared the same privilege (*see Table 6.3_Q2*). The value of acknowledging children with

good academic results through rewards is found in the following answers to the question: *What makes you think your teacher like you?*

Sam (P2): (165) IIIIIIIII (4 sec) pass my exam.
Rachel (P2): (91) Because I pass my Maths

Sam and Rachel were from the same class. Apparently, they had both been rewarded for doing well in the examination by their teacher and as a result, their confidence in teachers' satisfaction with them was boosted. This speaks of the importance of constructive feedback from teachers. While it has been held that self-esteem is a prerequisite for learning (e.g. Chall 2000:129), teachers who take upon themselves the responsibility to build students' self-esteem are thus believed to have greater impact on their educational progress.

Comparatively speaking, not as many teachers in the upper primary group practise giving tangible rewards to their students. Motivation for this group of children appears to incline on verbal encouragement. In the survey, the majority agreed on having teachers who would encourage them to work harder (*see Table 6.3_Q2*). The following quote gives an example of what these encouragements could mean.

Serena (P6): (132) Then, the rest of my teachers, I find them, sometime I find them quite naggy lah, but because like they like to nag a lot, say you never do work, they like to give a lot of work because our exam is coming, but, but then, is like quite good for me, because it helps me to pass my exam. So I find teachers very good and certain teachers are understanding, some are not.

Whether it was incentives, urges or lots of work, they were all tantamount to a teacher's expectation. In the literature review, low expectation was one of the factors cited for the prevalent underachievement among looked after children (*see 2.2.1 under School Experience*). The level of expectation, however, was not purposefully examined in this study, and so, it could not determine if teachers' expectation was generally low for this group of looked after children. All the current data have shown is that there were indications of positive encouragement for them from their teachers.

The prominent role of teachers in their students' education success has also made them the chief spokesperson for the importance of school. As reflected in the survey, more than 50 per cent of the respondents attributed the importance of school to an understanding that was impressed on them by their teachers (*see Table 6.4_Q9*); a result higher than that of their parents and the staff at the Home. The influence of teachers on students' attitude towards learning is irrefutable. If school progress were a concern of the Home for its charges, cooperation between the Home staff and teachers would be an area to explore.

Mary (P4): (78) Then, she teach us to be good. Ah, then, she teach us what to do and what not to do loh. (174) Very kind, and then um very good to me lah, then sometime we we got problem, teacher will help to set, settle lah, solve the problems, then no more.

The expectation of good conduct is essentially embedded in a school's culture and teachers do have the responsibility to ensure that students observe the stipulated rules and regulations. The altruistic value of such expectation was captured by the responses in the survey; when asked to complete the sentence: *School will be a more enjoyable place if,* collective actions were by far the most articulated factor (*see Table 6.2_Q10*). These actions included the need for them to listen, cooperate and respect authority, to be rule abiding and to restrain from getting into trouble with others. The outcome indicates their recognition of the impact an individual's action has on others' experience in school.

Nevertheless, teachers who leave a mark are teachers who go beyond training students to be rule abiding. When a certain social value was sensed to be missing, these teachers would take time to teach it and provide personal guidance. The above quotation is a good example. The P4 girl was appreciative of her teacher's effort in trying to inculcate good moral and social skills in her.

Table 6.4_Q9
School is important because

Child	I can learn	I can have friends	I can play	Parents say so	Staff say so	Teachers say so	Friends say so	A*	B*	C*	Others
001	1	1	1					1	1	1	
002	1										
003	1				1			1	1		
004	1	1						1		1	
005	1	1		1	1	1		1	1	1	give me the education I need
006	1	1		1		1		1	1	1	
007	1			1	1			1	1	1	
008	1			1		1	1	1	1	1	
009	1	1						1	1	1	I myself must be willing to learn
010	1			1					1	1	
011	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	when I get a degree, I can come back and help the home children
012	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	
013	1			1	1	1		1	1	1	
014	1	1						1	1	1	
015	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	big brother says so
016	1	1	1					1	1	1	
017	1	1	1					1	1	1	
018	1	1	1			1					
019	1	1							1	1	
020	1							1	1	1	
021	1					1		1	1	1	Let me know more things
022	1			1	1	1		1	1	1	I can learn to write composition and many new syllabus
P4-6	**22**	**13**	**7**	**10**	**8**	**10**	**3**	**18**	**19**	**19**	
023	1									1	
024	1	1		1	1			1	1	1	
025	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
026	1	1	1			1		1	1	1	
027	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
028	1							1	1	1	
029	1							1	1	1	
030	1	1						1	1	1	
031	1	1		1	1	1		1	1	1	
035		1	1			1		1	1	1	
032	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	
033	1	1	1			1		1	1	1	
034	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	help me pass my exam
039	1							1	1	1	
040	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
041	1							1	1	1	
036	1					1		1	1	1	
037	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
038	1	1		1	1	1		1	1	1	
P1-3	**18**	**13**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**12**	**6**	**18**	**18**	**19**	

**A-I will learn to take care of myself when I grow up, B-it will help me find the kind of job I want, C-it will help me become a better person*

In the case of misconduct, some teachers did appear to have greater success than others to get their students to listen to them. The principle that children who value their relationship with the primary teacher are more likely to want to accomplish specific social and academic tasks in the classroom (Davis 2001) is thought to be applicable in this context. The following examples show that a personal approach conveys the message of care, and it certainly has gone well with the interviewees:

Willie (P5): (108) Sometime she talk to me scold us. And, talk to me, like alone lah. Then I feel more quiet ah.

Jareth (P4): (47) When I good, my teacher buy for me things and when I bad, my teacher like just talk to me, but my teacher like I have, if I be good, my teacher give me food to eat, and more things, so my teacher like, like bring me go out, then she is caring about me.

While teachers' care and patience in the face of waywardness are likely to bring a positive experience to looked after children, it may not be strong enough to deter misbehaviour. A recent research conducted in Singapore found that the quality of teacher-student relationships actually had a stronger influence on the academic than the behavioural outcome of the students (Tong 2005). A few of the interviewees had talked about their anger problem, with one citing it as the basis for his daily fight with peers. What some of their teachers had done was to engage the help of a school counsellor or send these students to the anger workshop held in school. Perhaps this was the ground for school to have come across as a centre for moral training. In the survey, when asked about the future benefits of school, the number of respondents who felt that it would *help them become better persons* was higher than the number who thought it would allow them *to find the job they want* and *take care of themselves when they grow up* (*see Table 6.4_Q9*). Credit for such an outcome is to be attributed to teachers who took time to inculcate values in their students and steps to help rein in misconduct.

Serena (P6): (34) if there is any problem in school, my teacher will help, or she will get someone to talk to me and try and help me sort things out, then, ah I just enjoy school lah

Looked after children often carry with them the emotional baggage from their problematic families to school. Any lack of understanding or support for their unique background on the part of teachers may undermine their school experience as well as motivation for achievement. Here, a P6 girl expressed deep appreciation for the teacher who arranged for her to get counselling during the time of family crisis. The timely support is believed to have done more than strengthening her tie with this teacher. She had later spoken favourably about the teacher's encouragement for her to enrol into a better secondary school.

Serena (P6): (139) Only a few teachers are understanding, like they understand how you feel and all that.

The need to be understood by their teachers was a point raised in the literature review (*see 2.2.2c*). The work of Martin & Jackson (2002) has found that children want their teachers to be informed of their care situation, as such awareness is thought to be instrumental in enhancing teachers' ability to empathize with them and henceforth, provide better guidance. Whether the same desire was present in this group of participants was explored through the survey question, *I think my teacher should know that I am staying in a Residential Home.* When the respondents were asked to state their answers by pointing the arrow to *yes, maybe, no* or in between, the results were largely positive (*see Table 6.5_Q3*). Although it is possible that some had not considered their choices but the fact that their teachers had already known about their background, it is believed that the number of respondents who were for the idea is still in the majority. Two of the three persons who preferred not to have their identity exposed did not pick *teachers* as one of the pull factors for school in the first question; two of the six who were uncertain about the issue were of the same category. It appears that their reason for going against the idea was driven by a poor relationship with their teachers.

Table 6.5_Q3
I think my teacher should know that I am staying in a Residential Home.

Child	No		Maybe		Yes
001	1				
002			1		
003					1
004					1
005					1
006					1
007			1		
008					1
009			1		
010					1
011					1
012			1		
013			1		
014					1
015					1
016					1
017					1
018					1
019					1
020					1
021	1				
022					1
P4-6	2	0	5	0	15
023					1
024					1
025					1
026					1
027					1
028					1
029					1
030					1
031					1
035					1
032					1
033					1
034			1		
039					1
040	1				
041					1
036					1
037					1
038					1
P1-3	1	0	1	0	17

P4G: teacher helps me to get more knowledge, help me to buy things I want, example: art materials, textbooks, reference books. Cut my hair and give me pocket money—school bursary.

According to the data collected in the survey, teachers were also in the key position to detect problems arising from children's home background and respond to situations where additional help would make a difference. This is more so when the responsibility of teaching a class is not shared by too many teaching professionals. In the above quotation, the girl's teacher helped her to buy the necessary materials for lessons, cut her hair and arranged for her to receive school bursary. Below is another examples cited by a respondent on what her teacher had done in response to the needs she had.

P5G: teacher encourages me to work hard on weight because I am underweight and give me personal tuition.

These are concrete examples that some teachers were going out of the way to meet certain personal needs of their students. Their actions suggest that they were aware of their students' background and circumstance, and in taking the initiative to provide the means, which were perceived to be lacking by their students, they had left a mark on these children. Such provision was also mentioned in the interviews, though from a different light. A teacher had used food and outing as incentives to encourage better academic or behavioural performance from the student:

Jareth (P4): (47) When I good, my teacher buy for me things and when I bad, my teacher like just talk to me, but my teacher like I have, if I be good, my teacher give me food to eat, and more things, so my teacher like, like bring me go out, then she is caring about me.

Apparently, special treatment from teachers was not uncommon among looked after children. In the survey, almost half of the respondents had picked *attend to my needs* as one of the things they like about their teachers *(see Table 6.3_Q2)*. The result is significant not only because of the special effort some teachers had made to meet the needs of looked after children, but also the absence of such effort by other teachers could

be a consequence of the school structure. To begin with, the local schools often have a teacher facilitating the learning of a class of around 40 students without any assistant. The overwhelming responsibilities that come with the size of teacher-student ratio are likely to work against any effort to recognize or respond to individual's needs. Besides, there may not have been any formal collaboration between schools and the Home in meeting the needs of students who are in care. As it was discovered in the preliminary findings, some teachers were evidently not aware of their students' care situation (*see 4.3.5*). This being the case, teachers will have greater difficulty to be effective with looked after children in schools.

6.3.3 Conclusion

This section has unveiled the many facets of an effective primary school teacher on one hand, and the need for these children to be understood and supported by their teachers on the other. A survey of the kind of teachers who were favoured by these children found that besides personal attributes, people who made special effort to acknowledge their achievements, correct their mistakes, empathize with their problems and respond to their inadequacies were highly appreciated.

Hence, a teacher's role is not to be underestimated. They are the likely source of security and attachment as they are predominantly the person that shapes the classroom environment, rules and knowledge for the child (Kutnick 1990:117). Not only will their effectiveness affect students' school experiences, with children who did not have the advantage of a healthy bond with their parents, they also play a significant role in their social development. The results entail a greater emphasis on the need for teachers to build good relationships with their students.

Another significant indication that has been borne out of the findings is the need for better collaboration between school and the Home. It is believed that teachers' awareness of their students' circumstance would more often than not lead to better understanding and relationships. As such, they ought to be informed not only of the placement but also the development of the student so as to ensure quality support for their charges' school experience and learning. This could be achieved through regular review meeting

between teachers and the Home staff. Inter-professional collaboration was indeed a measure highly recommended by the literature (*see 2.3.1*).

6.4 Getting along with classmates

Peers and peer relationships are an important part of a child's life. In a school context, proximity has it that interaction with peers and the desire to develop friendships become almost inevitable. Generally speaking, children like to socialize with peers. As found in the first section of this chapter, peers were known to be a pull factor for school (*see 6.1*). The finding also points to the fact that positive peer relationship is significant to children's school experience, more so when they move into the upper primary level.

Moreover, an overview of the interviews has found that all, except a P3 girl, thought they had *friend(s)* or even *best friend(s)* in class. Likewise, of all personnel listed, *friends* were thought to be an asset of school by the most respondents in the survey (*see Table 6.1_Q1*). Yet, in the view of Rubin et al (2005:467), "Identifying a child's friends is not as easy a task as one may surmise." This is because they may misinterpret the *meaning* of a friend and provide an over inclusive set of responses.

Not only the meaning of a friend could be elusive with children, its value of having one could also be questionable. Although such dyadic relationship has been associated to a child's emotional well-being and normative foundation, Hartup (1998:145) has argued that having a friend may not always be an advantage to his/her development. The identity of the child's friend and quality of the friendship are factors to be considered if developmental significance is to be assessed.

The study in question did not set out to investigate the identity of the participants' friends but the kind of relationships they had established with their peers. From their responses, it was found that while the majority had friends in class, their understanding of friendship could be very different. Moreover, there is the question of reciprocity as other than the participants in the study, no one has given their views on these relationships. Hence, this

section presents the various meanings of the peer relations mentioned in the interviews and/or demonstrated by the survey.

6.4.1 Companionship—as in the case of play

Sam (P2): (194) I love my friend because ..he play with me (pause) sometime.

Play was an activity most cited for the things they did with their friends. Since *play* is essential in a child's life (see 6.1), it is inevitably a major common ground for friendship to develop. Thus, *play* is not only an activity but could well be a significant pointer to the friendly relationship they had with their peers. However, this was not always the case. While *play with me* has garnered the highest number of responses for the kind of relations that are available in class (*see Table 6.6_Q4*), not all of these respondents thought they had friends. Cross-references were made to the table for question one (*see Table 6.1_Q1*) and it was found that 6 of the 8 persons who did not pick *friends* as something that had drawn them to school had classmates who would *play* with them. The result points to the fact that playing together does not always culminate in friendship. While some might have likened playmates as friends, others certainly had more to say about what took place in the relations.

Jacintha (P5): (115) Some of them. Because they will play, play with me. (148) Three. [best friend] We all play. We all will make each and other happy. (156) Like (laughing) like ah, if (pause) if he angry, then I'll make him happy, if I angry, he will make me happy all that lah

Jazreel (P5): 274 More than one lah. (276) We play together. We talk together. (280) we play together, we talk together, we eat together, and many more lah.

Table 6.6_Q4

In my class, there are people who

Child	Play with me	kind to me	do things with me	share with me	help me in my study	encour-age me	treat me fairly	irritate me	fight with me	scold me	bully me	I bully	I cannot get along	Others
001	1			1	1	1		1	1	1				
002	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1					
003	1	1			1			1						
004	1	1		1	1	1								
005	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1			1	1	
006	1	1		1	1	1	1						1	
007	1	1	1		1								1	
008	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1				
009	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1						not friendly at all
010			1										1	
011	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1			1	
012	1	1	1	1			1	1		1				
013	1		1	1	1					1				
014	1		1	1	1									
015	1	1	1	1	1	1	1							after exam, celebrate
016	1	1	1	1	1	1	1							
017	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	treat me as a family
018	1		1	1	1						1			
019	1	1		1				1		1	1			
020	1			1	1	1							1	
021											1		1	
022	1			1				1		1			1	do not want to listen to me, complain that they do more work than me
P4-6	**20**	**14**	**14**	**18**	**17**	**12**	**10**	**8**	**4**	**7**	**4**	**2**	**9**	
023	1	1	1		1	1		1					1	
024	1	1	1	1	1	1								
025	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1			1	
026	1							1	1		1			
027	1	1	1	1	1	1	1						1	
028	1	1	1	1	1								1	
029		1	1	1	1	1	1	1					1	
030	1	1	1	1	1	1		1		1				
031	1	1	1	1	1	1	1							
035			1		1			1		1	1		1	
032	1		1	1			1					1		
033	1	1	1	1	1		1							
034	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	
039	1		1	1	1			1						
040	1	1	1	1	1	1	1						1	disturb me
041	1	1	1	1	1	1	1							
036	1	1	1	1	1	1	1							
037	1	1		1		1	1							
038								1		1			1	a friend very kind to me
P1-3	**16**	**14**	**16**	**15**	**15**	**12**	**11**	**9**	**2**	**5**	**3**	**1**	**9**	

Apparently, friends moved on from playmates to be companions in other activities. They were people whom the interviewees hung out and shared mutual interests with. Interestingly, the survey has unfolded the difference between the two age groups in the aspect of '*In my class, there are people who do things with me*' (*see Table 6.6_Q4*). The majority of the lower primary had companions to do things with them, but relatively fewer upper primary felt the same. If *playing together* was insufficient to denote friendship, and *doing things together* was in fact a better indicator, the outcome may be suggesting that some of the older children were likely to have experienced isolation in their classes.

6.4.2 Commonality—as in the case of sharing

Terry (P4): (172) then sometimes.. they give me food. Sometime I no money they will lend me. Ah, like that loh.

Besides companionship, sharing of resources was another common illustration offered by the interviewees when they were asked to provide a description of their relations with classmates or basis for their friendship. According to the data, the practice of sharing comes in different forms. The plainest would be the sharing of stationery, money, food and drinks. Perhaps it was their limited resources; most of references cast their classmates as the benefactors who would lend or give them things. Nonetheless, they were not always on the receiving end. At times, they would also do likewise for their peers.

Jareth (P4): (112) When I got money, I share with them. Then, is my birthday, they share with us, eh, um and they invite me to their birthday party, and celebration. (116) That's why I thank them.

As it was found, sharing of material resources often took place as a response to the need of the time or as a means to solidify a friendship. Embedded in the practice was the egalitarian nature of peer relationship. As recipients, apart from having their needs met, the act may carry the notion of peer acceptance. In the view of Hetherington & Parke (1999), such acceptance is significant in laying the foundation for children's social

development. When these children got to play the role of a benefactor, the act was itself empowering as it gave them a sense of importance. The ability to make contributions to their social group, as mentioned in 6.1.2, is developmentally significant to children between 6 to 12 (Dunlap 2002 citing Erikson's views).

The practice of sharing by their classmates was also examined in the survey. The result has shown that more than three quarters of the respondents had peers who would extend such benevolent gestures to them (*see Table 6.6_Q4*). However, when this result was weighed against *kind to me*, a discrepancy emerged, in particularly the upper primary group. Apparently, the action was not always perceived as an expression of kindness. Besides, 5 of the 8 who did not pick *friends* in question one (*see Table 6.1_Q1*) had classmates who would share with them. This is perhaps another sign of the effect of maturity, as older children begin to see beyond the action and grasp the intricacies of relationships: sharing of resources does not always equate friendship.

Finally, even though it was only brought up by a pair of respondents, there is another form of sharing that deserves some acknowledgement. It is the *sharing of social resources*. When asked to add to the list of things he liked about school, a P6 boy thought it was his *friends' family members* (*see Table 6.1_Q1*). They were said to have treated him well. A P5 boy, on the other hand, added that in his class, there were people who *treat me as a family* (*see Table 6.6_Q4*). These children were obviously introduced to their peers' family members and had experienced the warmth and care from a family other than their own. Such kindness was likely due to the fact that they were known to be in care. While such incident might have a totally unplanned beginning, it had allowed these children to establish social networks and emotional connections which extended to their peers' family. Hartup's (1992) work argues that the networks and connections constitute a major source of social support for children who had to cope with stress and adjustment difficulties (Rubin et al 2005). Hence, the sharing of social resources is likely to have a greater impact on looked after children, especially when there is an additional family to fall back on when their own are not functioning.

6.4.3 Compassion-as in the case of support

Wilson (P4): (94) Ah, because they all very kind to me, and they very, they also care about me. (97) Every time I got problem they will help me.

There was yet another level of peer relationship according to the interviewees and it was exemplified by the expression of care and support. Interviewees had spoken about having friends who would show their concern by helping them in their problems or providing constant encouragement. These experiences had made friends a great source of support, thereby an important asset.

Willie (P5): (148) play with me, talk to me, then encourage me.

In the case of problems, schoolwork might be an area where help was required. Some interviewees said their classmates had helped explain things they did not know or guide them in their homework. As recommended by Kohn (1998), students should learn in a safe and supportive community where they feel connected with their peers as a way to facilitate intellectual development.

Mary (P4): (187) I like my children, I like my friends, about they very kind lah, then don't know, I don't know something they will tell me lah.

Angel (P6): (249) Some people teach (255) They teach me how to do homework.

Positive friends are more likely to bring about positive influence. Having peers who would coach you on your studies is believed to have a positive influence on the academic success of looked after children (*see 2.2.2*). On the other hand, friend's pro-social characteristics are also said to have an effect on children's pacifistic solutions (Brendgen et al 1999). The following quotations are testimonies of peers playing the role of a reinforcer of desired behaviour:

Jacintha (P5): (115) And when I angry, they will call me don't be angry,

Benny (P5): (193) Like I say angry, or they will like come and ask what happened, then they all help.

While it was found that *share with me* does not necessarily mean *kind to me*, the same goes with *help me in my study*. Not all who had classmates who helped them in their studies thought they had classmates who were kind to them (*see Table 6.6_Q4)*. The survey was also used to see if having classmates who *encourage me* a common experience for the respondents, but the result wasn't as encouraging. Barely over half of the respondents thought it was true for them. The lowest numbers of agreement for the list of positive characteristics was in fact *treat me fairly*. That is to say that almost half of these children did not feel being supported by caring friends and just treatment in class. It is indeed a matter of concern as having supportive and intimate friendships is thought to be helpful in a student's involvement in school (Hartup 1998).

6.4.4 Confession—as in the case of self-disclosure

P1G: mom said don't tell

In citing an example for developmental considerations on the measurement of friendship perceptions, Furman (1996) states that intimacy among elementary school-aged children involves self-disclosure. A working definition for self-disclosure in Erwin's (1993: 108) work involves the child's voluntary revelation of personal information in the course of a relationship. While sharing of personal information is natural within social interactions, especially among children, it was not purposefully explored in the interviews.

One of the survey questions, however, attempted to find out whether the respondents thought their classmates knew about their placement background. The results were mainly affirmative (*see Table 6.7_Q5*). However, for those who had given a different answer, variation is found between the lower and upper primary, with the former predominantly negative and the latter, uncertain. In fact, none of the upper primary could be sure that their classmates did not already know about their placement background. The reasons for such difference could be the number of years in school or pattern of socialization according to age. Those who had spent a longer time in school were more likely to have had their status exposed. On the other hand, maturity is likely to have

increased the extent of sharing among peers, as well as their awareness about others' ideas of themselves.

Having only slightly more than half of the respondents confident of their classmates' knowledge of their placement, the outcome suggests that many of them had not voluntarily divulged the piece of information. In passing remarks, a P2 boy expressed that he 'didn't like them (classmates) to know' and a P1 girl confessed that her mother had instructed her not to tell anyone about her stay at the Home. This could be a predicament many looked after children had to deal with in a mainstream school. Whether the Home staff prepares them for such situations is not known. If left without intervention, the burden to hide their status could be dreadful for some, especially in their relationships with peers and school adjustment.

The issue of self-disclosure also leads to the question of reciprocity. So far, we have learnt that the majority of the interviewees like their peers and thought they had friends in their classes. However, the only means, in this study, to find out if these views were also shared by the other parties is through asking interviewees about their classmates' views of them: *Do you think your classmates like you* and *what make you think so.* It is believed that such questions ascertain the interviewee's self-perception, which may have an influence on his/her relationships (*see 3.2.3 interviews*). The result shows that while many held positive views about their classmates, fewer were confident about the vice-versa. When asked about their peers' opinions of them, some were clueless and some based their optimism on guesses.

Monica (P3): (242) Of course. (246) Don't know. I guess only. (272) I think that they are my best friends so I said they are my good friends loh

Apparently, few interviewees had taken the initiative to seek out their friends' opinions or feelings about them. This, however, is considered typical of children in Erwin's view (1993:121), as he believes the meaning of reciprocity in self-disclosure is yet to be fully appreciated until a child reaches middle childhood. As such, reciprocity of the participants' friendship can neither be established nor denied.

Table 6.7_Q5
My classmates know that I am staying in a Residential Home.

Child	No		Maybe		Yes	Remarks
001					1	
002					1	
003			1			
004			1			
005		1				
006					1	
007					1	
008					1	
009					1	
010					1	
011			1			
012		1				
013			1			
014			1			
015					1	
016					1	
017					1	
018					1	
019					1	
020			1			
021					1	
022			1			
P4-6	0	2	7	0	13	
023					1	
024					1	
025					1	
026	1					
027					1	
028					1	
029					1	
030					1	
031	1					
035	1					
032			1			
033			1			
034					1	
039					1	
040					1	I don't like them to know
041					1	
036	1					
037					1	
038	1					mom said don't tell
P1-3	5	0	2	0	12	

6.4.5 Conflicts

Jacintha (P5): (135) Because they very irritating. Like, like come and disturb me all that. If I angry, they will come and kick my table.

Conflicts here cover a wide range of problems participants had in their relationships with classmates. To name some, there were cases of bullies, fights, disputes and irritations. Yet, due to its limited references by both interviewees and respondents, these negative relations would all come under the same unit.

Having classmates who *irritate* them and they *cannot get along with* are by far the most common problems the respondents had encountered in class (*see Table 6.6_Q4*). There was a general consensus on these issues by both age groups. The source of irritations, as found in the interviews, often comes from a different sex; girls being irritated by boys, boys being scolded by girls. Usually, besides the expression of frustration, no actions were taken against the irritants.

On the other hand, fewer had picked *I bully* and *fight with me,* probably because these are more serious offences and will lead to disciplinary action both in school and at the Home (*see 5.4.2*). Consequently, the extent of the participants being bullied or acting as a bully is difficult to gauge even though the literature has referred to them as a likely experience of looked after children (*see 2.2.1 School experience*). Data gathered from the interviews and survey may have provided support to their presence but they are inadequate to establish them as a norm for the participants' school life.

A glimpse of the reality of the respondents' relationship with classmates is also found in the question concerning what could make school a more enjoyable place. About a quarter of them cited something to the effect of better peer relationship as their conditions (*see Table 6.2_Q10*). To name some, they include *nobody beat me*; *my classmates and teachers like me more*, *I have more friends*, and *there is someone who will always care about me.* On the whole, these statements seem to suggest that a fulfilling friendship was missing in their school life.

A likely cause for the difficulty the participants had in forming and maintaining friendship could have stemmed from their upbringing. Founded on the support of consistent research work, Price (1996:264) identified three relational problems of maltreated children—they are thought to be generally more aggressive, less competent, and some will actively withdraw from social interaction. While many of these participants were in care because of some form of maltreatment (*see 4.2.3*), their past experience could be an obstacle for them to relate well with their peers.

Yet, such problems were not detected in their relationships with peers at the Home. In answering the abovementioned survey question, a respondent recommended that *all Home children go to my school (see Table 6.2_Q10).* On the other hand, a probe into the identity of the *best friends* mentioned by the interviewees found that several were in fact their peers from the residential home. They were attending the same school and in the same class. Having common ground and experiences were the likely factors that these children shared a stronger tie. After all, individuals usually cleave together based on their similarities (Aboud & Mendelson 1996, Hartup 1998). The topic of peer relationship at the Home will be further discussed in the next chapter.

6.4.6 Conclusion

Overall, many positive exchanges were being reported by the interviewees concerning their relationships with classmates. While they appeared to be amiable, it could be the result of three possibilities: questions were skewed towards positive relationships, having friends was something they could be proud of and would want others to know about, or their relationships with peers were generally fulfilling.

At least five categories of peer relations had been deduced from the data and they were companionship, commonalities, compassion, confession and conflict. By and large, these categories accentuated the many advantages for a child to be getting along with peers in school. Companionship is a basic need of mankind. For children, having peers to play, talk and do things with prevents loneliness, as well as allows them to acquire skills and competencies in relating with the larger world. Commonalities and compassion highlights the practice of sharing and support, which in fact are important elements that

help reinforce children's resilience according to Grotberg (1995). They are deemed to be essential for children's confidence and self-image outside their family and residential home. Confession is about disclosing personal information, a common practice among youngsters, especially when there is mutual trust in their relationships. Conflicts covers a wide range of relational problems the participants had encountered in school. They could be signs of their experience of maltreatment at home.

Although there were comparatively more positive reports than negative ones, several deficiencies were spotted in the analysis. First, it appears that while many had companions to play with, not all had mates to do things with; older children stood a higher chance of isolation than their younger peers. Second, in terms of sharing and supporting, the participants mostly referred to themselves as people at the receiving end. Even so, these acts were not always viewed as an expression of kindness or encouragement. Third, some were clearly hesitant about revealing their placement background to classmates and the extent of reciprocity was difficult to establish. Finally, where there were problems with classmates, they were not apparent with peers from the Home.

Although it has been founded that children who have more friends tend to do better in school adjustment (Berndt 1996), children's attitudes toward school and learning, however, are influenced not just by the number of friends they have but also the kind of friends they socialize with (Dunlap 2002). This is because their attitudes tend to match those of their friends'. When the survey set out to explore the decision makers for various school matters, it was found that friends' involvement in decision-making increased by age (*compare Table 6.8_Q8a & 6.9_Q8b*). While having friends is a crucial aspect of children's lives, peer influence should never be overlooked in the bid to encourage school progress.

Table 6.8_Q8a
Decision makers for the following school matters...

P4-6	Teachers	Friends	Jieh Jieh Nellie	Social Worker	House-mother	Director	Parents	Myself	Principal	?
CCA	5	2	12	3	0	0	2	12	0	0
Time to reach school and time to return	7	2	12	3	5	4	3	4	0	0
Pocket money	2	0	5	3	15	6	4	0	0	1
Stationery	7	2	17	2	0	1	4	8	0	0
Go out with friends	0	3	15	2	0	3	4	6	0	0
School excursions	10	1	16	4	0	3	2	5	0	0
Visits from friends	1	0	15	6	0	6	4	3	0	0
Visits from family	1	0	11	9	1	8	7	7	0	0
School Transfer/ school	2	0	7	11	0	9	10	3	0	0
	35	10	110	43	21	40	40	48	0	1

Data are the number of times the personnel being mentioned

Table 6.9_ Q8b
Decision makers for the following school matters...

P1-3	Teachers	Friends	Jieh Jieh Nellie	Social Worker	House-mother	Director	Parents	Myself	Principal	?
CCA	7	0	4	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Time to reach school and time to return	4	0	7	0	5	1	0	0	2	5
Pocket money	0	0	3	0	16	1	0	0	0	0
Stationery	0	0	16	1	0	0	0	2	0	0
Go out with friends	0	1	13	1	1	4	0	1	1	0
School excursions	8	0	6	1	0	0	1	0	3	1
Visits from friends	0	2	10	0	0	7	0	0	0	1
Visits from family	0	0	5	4	1	4	7	1	0	0
School Transfer/ school	0	0	5	3	0	3	10	0	0	0
	19	3	69	10	23	20	18	5	6	7

Data are the number of times the personnel being mentioned

6.5 The impact of school transfer

According to the survey, 15 of the 41 respondents had at least one school transfer during the period of primary education. This is slightly higher than the demographic study conducted about two years ago, where 13 of the 39 residents had the same experience (*see 4.3.1*). In other words, for every three children who came into residential care, at least one had had gone through the change from one school to another. Most of the time, this decision was made by the authoritative figures such as parents, social workers, and the director of the Home without their participation (*see Table 6.10_Q8c*).

Table 6.10_Q8c
Decision makers for school transfer

Child	Teachers	Friends	Jieh Jieh Nellie	Social Worker	House-mother	Director	Parents	Myself	No. of Transfer	Year of Transfer
001							1		1	P3
003								1	1	P4
004			1	1		1			1	P4
005							1		1	P2
007							1		2	P2/P3
009	1		1	1		1	1	1	1	P2
010							1		2	?/P4
012				1		1			1	P3
014				1					1	P3
016							1		2	P3/P4
017							1		1	P4
020				1		1			1	P2
030									1	P1
031			1						1	P2
039							1		1	P2
P1-6	**1**	**0**	**3**	**5**	**0**	**4**	**8**	**2**		

Given that school transfer was not considered a common experience for all students, the interview schedule did not direct any question to explore its potential impact. Among the 21 interviewees, 8 had the experience of having to start anew in another school but only 2 initiated the subject matter. Nonetheless, the comparison they made between the former and current schools highlighted the emotion hurdles these children have to cross in dealing with school transfers:

6.5.1 The challenge of adjustment

Jazreel (P5): P1 until P4, P4 until half a year, then I go SGSS. (49) But I like to my, I like to go to my own school. (56) I don't the, I don't think the school [pause] match me.

Jazreel, whose transfer took place a year before the interview, felt strongly that her current school does not "match" her. She continued to refer to her former school as her "own" school and has expressed dissatisfaction with the current one. While she was unable to explain the actual cause for such feeling, her problem seemed to be a case of failing to assimilate in the new setting. Looking at her school history, it is easy to explain such difficulty as she had spent four years in her former school but only one in the

current school. Yet, her sentiment was shared by a P6 girl, Serene who had spent only a year in her former school but five in the current one.

Serena (P6): (388) I was in CKC when I was Primary One. And then later I shift there because I was staying in (unclear) Ya, I prefer my old school because down there I've got lot of friends.

The issue apparently is not just about the length of time one spent in the former school or the current one. The change had likely invoked an emotional reaction. Keeping in mind that the transfer was a result of placement, it also imposes a change of one's identity in the school context. Having to start anew under such circumstance could have hampered the feeling of belonging. Thus comparisons were made of the former and current school with the former considered to be superior over the current. Without any conscious effort from either the Home or school, the lack of engagement in the new setting may affect their school experience and possibly their academic performance.

6.5.2 The challenge of re-establishing ties

Jazreel (P5): (97) In, in the real school, right. Eh, I mean in my own, own school right, I got (pause) a lot of favourite teachers in my own school.

Besides adjustment problem, Jazreel had pointed out another equally upsetting reality about school transfers and that was the loss of relationships. While she had many favourite teachers in her former school, there was only one teacher whom she had felt connected with in the current school and this teacher was not even teaching her (*see 6.3.1*). Whereas for Serena, short might be her time at her former school, her memory of being in a class where people were friendly and hardly fought, remained vivid. This memory had given her an opportunity to make comparisons, which in turn became a factor of her dissatisfaction with her current classmates.

Serena (P6): (397) Ya, because like that school, that entire class is all my friends, because everyday we talk to each other one, we don't have, we don't quarrel or fight one, but then like in this school I find it's like the girls are all different, but

whereas in my old school, in my class, everybody are friends, we don't treat each other as enemies, but this, this new school, I find there are a lot of enemies in class, a lot of people treat their friends as enemies.

As it was pointed out in the literature, having to break away from people when relationships were cultivated was in fact a predicament of looked after children who were no strangers to school transfer (*see 2.2.1 care experience*). As the change disrupts stability and continuity in curriculum as well as relationships, it could be detrimental to their school life and academic achievement. Teachers and classmates are the two main pillars of support in schools. The girls' accounts gave evidence that inability to establish ties with either one would be deeply felt. However, to start anew in both groups could be an insurmountable challenge especially when help was not available. Relationships remain a crucial issue in school transfers.

6.5.3 Conclusion:

Considering the fact that six of those who were transferred to another school did not say anything positive or negative about the experience, the views of the two girls could not be conclusive. In fact, the various possible feelings that are associated with moving to a new school, according to the training manual on supporting children in public care in schools, include anxious, scared, vulnerable, disorientated, unsure, isolated, and excited (Holland & Randerson 2005:transparency 31). The point is that the initial transition of joining a school is a key event for a young person and careful planning is necessary (*ibid.* 77). The girls had presented us with the potential pitfalls of such changes when there is no conscious effort from the authorities in the transition process.

Besides school transfers, this group of children are also susceptible to other forms of school disruption, such as temporary withdrawal due to family crisis or late enrolments. Some would have to go through more than one transfer due to failed restoration. Inadvertently, these children were disadvantaged in having their school life disrupted mostly not of their own doing. The incorporation of a personalized educational plan into the care plan was therefore proposed by various researches (*see* 2.3.4). It is a procedure that would help to identify areas of educational needs and development of looked after

children. This mechanism, however, was not practised by the Home in question (*see 5.3.2 Discussion*).

6.6 School and their future

Finally, in view of the fact that the future of most looked after children are likely to be gloomy, as was found in the literature review (*see 2.1*), interviewees in this study were invited to talk about their career aspiration and whether their current schools had any role to play in its materialization. While not all had a definite answer to give, the majority appeared to have thought about it. Their aspirations were largely influenced either by role models in their lives and personal predilection. Teachers and policemen were common ambitions, as for most young boys and girls, and directors, social workers and doctors (by a boy who had a chronic medical condition) were also cited. Those who did not opt for an ambitious career had their eyes set on things they enjoyed doing. For instance, they had aspired to become a bus driver, soccer player, flower seller and singer or dancer.

When asked about the role of school in view of their future, the majority upheld its importance even though some answers were vague. For those who had foreseen the requirement of knowledge, skills and certificates by their career choice, school was thought to be a place that is preparing them for their goals ahead.

Wilson (P4): (189) study hard (192) And When I grow up, I get my certificate I can go to find my job and I can become a police officer.

Mary (P4): (399) You can study, so that, you, like, how to say ah, you can, when you grow up right, want to be teacher right, you can take, you can use all your learning from school ah, to teach other people.

In these cases, the career aspiration of the individual could be an effective motivation for working hard in school since success in school was comparable to achieving one's goal. Yet, school is important not only because it is a significant stepping-stone to one's

ambition. For others, education would lead to employment which in turn had bread and butter significance.

Cheryl (P2): (365) Yes, So that we can earn money and pay for the bill.

Jacintha (P5): (210) Maybe. (216) Because if I never study hard, nobody also can help me, ah.

These appeared to be the ones who had envisaged the need to be independent in their adulthood and thought school was the key to future self-reliance. On the other hand, the value of school was more than getting a job and getting your bill paid. A noteworthy remark is found in the response given by a P5 girl during the survey. In addition to the items listed on the chart, she believed school was important also because it would allow her to return to the Home to help other children who shared her fate (*see Table 6.4_Q9*). While her ambition was not without precursor as it had been the practice of the Home to welcome old boys and girls to return as volunteers, her desire had given her a new meaning in working hard and getting a university degree.

Insofar, the findings have pointed to the fact that these participants were making a connection between schools and their future. School success was admitted by the majority to have significance in their adulthood. Whether this understanding had led to a change in their attitude towards learning and school is not known. As children in public care, they relied on school personnel and the Home staff to provide the necessary reinforcement and support. In a similar vein, Tveit & Arnesen (2004:122) write, "One of the main tasks for residential care institutions, as it is for schools, is to do whatever is necessary to motivate the young people to learn in a broad sense". Apparently, the approach found in western literature is also applicable in a local setting.

Yet, when asked to give their take concerning the factors that could lead to better academic performance, only a handful of respondents had considered outside resources, such as better support through more help and change of policy (*see Table 6.11_Q12*). The majority actually viewed themselves as solely responsible for making any progress. While there is nothing wrong with children taking responsibility of their studies, it does

raise questions concerning their awareness of the possibility of better support and whether they were given an opportunity to state their wishes for such support.

Table 6.11_Q12
My school results will be better if

Personal Effort	Better Behaviour	Better Support
*I study (2) *I study hard (12) *I study harder (3) *I study hard with the following weeks I have left *I study more *I work hard (6) *I work harder (2)	*I will not talk, fight, play in class *don't irritate people *do not care about who irritated me	*people come and teach me (2) *have more tutor come and teach me
*I learn more/ I learn new things *I learn more about things	*I pay more attention (2) *listen to my teachers (3) what she has taught *listen in class (2) when my teachers are talking and learn from them	*I can join the other P4 children, not left alone, during tuition
*I put an my effort to study *try hard *concentrate on my work	*mum has a maid now (can move back) better results-concentrate on the paper, like not to be nervous	*my teachers don't give me too much homework/ not too fierce with us
*I revise my homework *I revise my work	*learn how to obey teachers and practice and don't waste time	*also we can volunteer not to go outings but to study and work hard.
*we remember the things that teachers taught us	*stop being lazy, always revise the work, instead of playing and running around/ do not play in the night so will not to fall asleep in class.	
*read more story book/ learn how to write *I read more	*I am quiet	

**() indicates number of times mentioned*

To conclude, the work of Jackson and Simon (2006:44) in the value of ensuring school success of looked after children is worth considering as they have shown that,

> *the sum required to support children's learning effectively when they are separated from their families are trivial compared with the costs incurred by failing to do so, and compared with the potential savings if the average attainment of looked after children could be brought closer to that of the school population generally.*

Hence, the profits of investing in looked after children's school success really go beyond their personal gains. While the significance of education has been explained in chapter one (*see 1.5*), by taking proactive/counteractive measures early, it is believed that society will stand a higher chance of ridding itself of certain social costs.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has unveiled a repertoire of experiences and perspectives of looked after children concerning their schools. Although their contemporaries could have shared many of these perspectives, there were a number of noteworthy findings. To begin with, the majority of them did like school. It resonates the findings that school is a haven for children with a problematic background, as it provides them an avenue to forget about their troubles and opportunities to regain confidence (Taylor 2006, Brandon et al 1998). In this study, it was found that many were able to benefit from the various aspects of school. School in its wealth of diversified experiences, was a place where they could play and socialize, learn and grow, as well as relate and integrate. In effect, it was a place where mainstream experience could be acquired and life could be normalized.

Nonetheless, school has its challenges too. Jamrozik & Sweeney (1996:140) believe school can impose great pressure on children as it sorts out 'successes' and 'failures'. Hence, despite its many benefits, to some, school remained overshadowed by its other deficiencies, such as the humdrum of school life, overdose of homework and insensitive school personnel.

Teachers were critical factors in looked after children's school experience and progress. Empowered by their position and authorities, they were capable of spotting personal needs of their charges and taking appropriate actions. Evidence has shown that they played significant roles in the encouragement of better results, reinforcement of better behaviour, and provision of specific helps. In dealing with children who were disadvantaged by their home background, teachers could not have been more effective if they had not the knowledge of their students' situation. The findings have thereby underscored the importance of collaboration between the Home staff and teachers.

Classmates were important figures in school as they were the ones who would have a great impact on looked after children's socialization and integration. The older they were, the higher the chances of them being influenced by friends on their decisions and attitude. Five categories of relations were explored and they were companionship, commonalities, compassion, confession and conflict. By and large, peers in class were, in their views, friendly and could be a source of support in sharing of resources, helping in schoolwork and even times of predicament. Occasionally, this support could even come from their peers' family members. Nonetheless, there were telling signs that relationships with peers in school were not all satisfying, especially when they were compared to those with peers in the Home. Reluctance in divulging their stay at the Home to classmates was perhaps a hindrance to a more intimate relation.

School transfer occurred to at least a third of the participants, usually not of their own choice. While the change requires not only old ties to be severed, but also new relations to be established, it is found that without special assistance, children would find it difficult to fit in in the new environment. More so as the change was typically a consequence of other traumas that took place in their lives. Finally, as the majority were able to link education to their future careers and independency, early investment in ensuring school success for them is worthy of consideration. It is believed that such investment will reap fruits in the long run by reducing social costs.

The importance of school therefore lies in the fact that it is a centre of normalization. It offers looked after children an opportunity to experience what is common to the majority and at the same time, put their problems behind. Eventually, those who have taken advantage of its providence stand a chance for future independence and integration. In short, school compensates and allows them to redress their early disadvantage.

The description of children's perspectives of school remains incomplete if their views of the Home's environment are not considered. After all, the Home background is what distinguishes this group of children from their classmates. The Home evidently has a role to play in their school's experience and perspectives, and this we will have to explore in the next chapter.

Chapter Seven: Children's Perspectives II

Home - the Centre of Empowerment

At first sight, this chapter may appear to be irrelevant for moving away from the focus of the study given that looked after children's perspectives of the Home environment are not purposefully sought by the research questions stated in the former chapter. Living in an institutional residence, however, is what distinguished these looked after children from their peers in schools. The residential home is not simply a place where they start and end their school day in. It is also the centre where a wide-range of decisions and arrangements tantamount to those of parents are made for them each day. While school has been established as a centre for normalisation, the Home has the role of empowerment; its people, programme and environment are all likely to have an impact on children's school experience as well as progress. The attempt to represent children's perspectives of the Home in this chapter, therefore, is to allow the study a broader view of children's perspectives of school.

Notwithstanding the above, the study did not set out to evaluate the Home's efficiency in its support for children's experience in school and progress. This is the reason why such a measure was not incorporated in the various data collection instruments. Although there were questions related to the Home in the interviews and survey, they were carefully set so that participants will not feel the pressure of having to give an appraisal of the Home.

As a result, two themes that were considered to have set looked after children apart from their peers in school were developed. The first concerns the people at the Home and the second, the environment of the Home. People and environment are two powerful factors in the development of any child. Although data are limited, they have shown how these factors could have influenced a child in his or her school experience.

Similar to the previous chapter, the word *interviewee* and *respondent* are used to demarcate the sources of data. Quotation cited from the interviews is accompanied by interviewee's pseudo name, class level and line number on the transcript.

7.1 Relationships that empower

As it is known, residential home care provides a communal environment and structured programme. Looked after children in the Home are exposed to a social network that consists of at least three categories of people: those who are responsible for them, those who come in to volunteer their resources, and those who share their destinies. Nonetheless, the population and division of labour in this community are not the only challenges confronting its residents. Children who come into care are people who have experienced separation or even loss with their natural parents (Kahan 1979, Brandon et al 1998). The move from their family of origin to the Home is believed to be hurtful for their sense of identity (Peake 2006). Consequently, a challenge in group care is the development of close relationships (Thomas 2005). This study does not dig deep into the complexity of relationships forming at the Home. This will perhaps require a new research effort to accomplish. Bearing in mind the focus of the study, the following sections explore the role and potential influence of the people at the Home on the participants' school experience.

7.1.1 Staff

Rachel (P2): (190) Jieh Jieh Nellie usually teach us Maths, English and Chinese (301) Jieh Jieh Nellie, and all the staff... teach us.

Davison (1995) puts it across that the quality of care is basically determined by the quality of the staff employed given its 'people-centred' commitment. The staff at the Home are people who have been designated a professional responsibility to care for looked after children. Those who are in direct authority include the director, social workers, programme coordinator and housemothers. Under the division of labour, each

title entails a specific role which is created to meet the wide-ranging needs of children in residential care (*see 5.2.3*).

In the case of schooling, the various aspects of school are likely to be in the remit of various personnel. As it was found in the survey (*see Table 6.8_Q8a & 6.9_Q8b*), decisions concerning school transfer and perhaps the choice of school were more likely to be made by the director and social workers, other than their parents. This finding is aligned with their responsibilities of having to liase with parents and draw up placement details (*see 5.2.3*). On the other hand, the programme coordinator (*Jieh Jieh Nellie is her pseudonym)* was the most prominent figure in the day to day school matters. Her involvement could be seen on all nine school-related issues posed to the respondents, albeit at a different degree. Her authority was most felt in the aspects of stationery, going out with friends and visits from friends for the lower primary and the upper primary would add in CCA (Co-Curricular Activity), school excursion and time to go to school and time to return. Finally, as direct carers, the housemothers were mainly responsible for dispensing pocket money and perhaps, to be involved in the time they to go to school and return.

The significant role of the programme coordinator in school matters was reflected in the interviews. According to the interviewees, she checked their school bags, taught during their study hour, and carried out disciplinary actions for their misconduct in schools. An example to draw from would be the episode that took place during one of the interviews. A P5 girl who had a skirmish with her teacher that morning was summoned to give a report to the programme coordinator. As the order came during the interviews, she told the interviewer that caning was to be expected for her behaviour.

Jacintha (P5): (222) Like if I angry, then if somebody control me right, if I still cannot control, I will go and fight back, then I will get canning and scolding from Jieh Jieh Nellie,

When the interviews set out to identify the persons whom they considered to have cared about their studies, the programme coordinator came in second as the most referred to person (11 times as compare to 15 for teachers). In response to the question concerning

the person who cared the most, 8 persons mentioned her name whereas only 5 thought it was their teachers and 4, parents. The impact of her role and devotion is irrefutable. While the former chapter affirms teachers to be the chief spokesperson for school's importance (*see 6.3.2 & Table 6.4_Q9*), these findings unfold the fact that staff at the Home play an equally significant role in looked after children's schooling. After all, they are the ones who possess the specific knowledge and mechanism to work with children in care. The following is an example of the reward system that was practised at the Home to encourage better behaviour and school results *(see Table 7.1_Q7)*:

P5B: if behaved and do well in school results, get presents and outings

Notwithstanding the positive impact, the ideal of having public carers playing the role of good parents (*see 2.2.1 Care Experience*) remains a challenge, especially in a group care situation. Evidence has shown that, while the majority in the survey agreed *help for homework* and *encouragement for studies* were available at the Home, not as many thought there were *people who take care of my school matters (see Table 7.1_Q7).* Understandably, those who took the position were mainly in the lower primary as they would have a greater reliance on adults' attention and care as compared to their older peers. On the other hand, in an interview, a P5 boy spoke about not being able to confide in anyone at the Home about his needs.

Willie (P5): (288) If I go school, I go talk to teacher, friends. (292) Here ah? Here ah? (294) Sometime keep to myself, if I... I angry, I bag (?) myself lah, I go school, then I tell lah (299) I don't like to tell in here

Table 7.1_Q7
In the Home, I can find

Child	Help for my homework	People who take care of my school matters	Encouragement for my studies	Friends	A quiet place for reading	Many things to learn	Others
001	1	1	1	1		1	
002	1	1	1	1	1	1	
003	1	1	1	1			
004	1	1	1	1		1	
005	1	1	1	1	1	1	companies when I am lonely
006				1			
007	1	1	1	1		1	
008	1	1	1	1		1	
009	1	1	1	1			People who care about my problem
010	1		1		1	1	
011	1	1	1	1	1	1	help to watch my sister's behaviour
012	1	1	1	1			good staff
013	1	1		1		1	
014	1	1	1	1			
015	1	1	1	1	1	1	if behaved and do well in school results, get presents and outings
016	1	1	1	1	1	1	
017	1	1	1	1	1	1	childcare (friends there)
018	1	1	1	1	1	1	
019	1	1	1	1		1	outings/Sunday-soccer training
020	1	1	1	1		1	many tutors to encourage me in my studies
021	1	1	1	1	1	1	very fun, friends very good to me
022	1	1	1			1	people like social workers who pray for me, tell me about God and encourage me to be strong
P4-6	**21**	**20**	**20**	**20**	**9**	**17**	
023	1	1	1	1			
024	1	1	1	1	1	1	
025	1	1	1	1	1	1	
026	1		1	1	1	1	
027	1	1	1	1	1	1	people help me buy things when we don't have money, presents, celebrate our birthdays
028	1	1	1	1	1	1	
029	1	1	1	1		1	
030	1	1	1	1	1	1	
031	1	1	1	1	1	1	
035			1		1	1	
032	1			1	1	1	Play
033	1	1		1	1	1	
034	1	1	1	1	1	1	
039	1		1	1		1	
040	1	1	1	1	1	1	a nice place to stay
041	1	1	1	1	1	1	
036	1	1	1	1	1	1	
037	1	1	1	1	1	1	
038	1	1	1	1	1	1	can read in chapel
P1-3	**18**	**15**	**17**	**18**	**16**	**18**	

Willie's problem was an indication of his lack of bonding with someone in the Home, especially an adult figure. As mentioned, it is not easy for children in group care to develop close relationships or to have someone who knows them like a parent does (Thomas 2005). Children of younger age or children with a traumatic home history are in particular need of adults' assistance and affection. To place them within a community where needs are met by a series of carers with differentiated roles risks the possibility of undermining the attention that is needed by the individuals. Moreover, the group is neither homogenous nor stable. The Home in question had an average of 40 primary school children, not taking into account the preschoolers and children in special education, during the various phases of data collection. While the programme coordinator had the major role in overseeing their day-to-day school matters, despite her enthusiasm and devotion, it was hard to expect her to be equally efficient in following through the academic and disciplinary needs of each and every child. School matters aside, the respondents had shown their appreciation of the staff by adding in their personal remarks on the question *In the Home, I can find* (*see Table 7.1_Q7*):

P6G: people who care about my problem.
P5G: help to watch my sister's behaviour
P5G: good staff
P4G: people like social workers who pray for me, tell me about God and encourage me to be strong.
P3B: people help me buy things when we don't have money, presents, celebrate our birthdays.

While relationship between staff and children was in general amicable, when asked to complete the unfinished sentence *The Home will be a better place for learning if*, there appeared to be some contradictory statements in their expectations of the staff (*see Table 7.2_Q11*). On one hand, there were requests for less scolding, less rules, and on the other, for greater assertion of their authority over misbehaviour. The tension could perhaps be summed by a P5 girl's response when she acknowledged that the staff should be more patient but the responsibility actually lay with the children who deserved punishment yet disliked it. Likewise, there were those who believed the Home would be a better place for learning if they had listened to and respected the staff.

Table 7.2_Q11

The Home will be a better place for learning if

Facilities	Programme	Staff	Collective actions	Peers	Personal actions
*Dining hall is enclosed and air-con (2), as now it is open and birds fly in leaving behind bird shit which is very dirty *there is air-con	*I can learn new things *there are interesting thing to see *have many books *learn a lot of good things, sing songs to God *learn more things so when you grow up can earn more money, help mother buy things	*staff is patient, the matter is with the children-they cause the staff to punish them and they do not like it *the staff and volunteers teach us not to run away	*we listen to the staff (3), Jieh Jieh Nellie and housemother *we obey the staff and not do the things that do not please others *learn to respect the housemother	*there are more new friends in the Home	*I respect the staff *You listen properly *I cooperate with the people (children) and staff
*There is a room for each level of children (eg P6/P5)	*I have a volunteer to teach me what I do not know *there are a lot of teachers	*it is strict with the children	*we obey the rules *children here do not cause trouble and behave themselves *we do not fight		*I work harder *I study
	*children can play	*there is less scolding *the staff do not scold people	*everyone pays attention to what they are saying and be quiet when others are studying for their exam *children here are quiet *it is more quiet		
	*no need to follow all the rules		*we can keep our things safely *we do not steal people things		
			*we can grow in concern and care from the staff who God has sent *we cooperate *everyone knows their mistake		
			*we study (2)		
			*we all believe in God, same religion		

**() indicates number of times mentioned*

Finally, it was also found that the staff were a source of inspiration for some of these children. When asked what he would like to be when he grew up in the interviews, a P6 boy responded:

Steve (P6): (278) Wait. OFFICER. (280) Like Mr Sim like this. (laughing)

Mr Sim is the pseudonym given to the incumbent Director of the Home. His role and responsibility had apparently left an indelible mark on this boy. Another example would be a P5 girl whose desire was to become a social worker. While these children were in their impressionable age, positive role models were significant to their development.

7.1.2 Volunteers

Serena (P6): (580) Our volunteers only come on Monday. (592) But then, sometimes on a Thursday right, Thursday or Friday lah, there are some Junior College students who come here to teach us.

The subject of volunteers was not specifically explored during the interviews and survey, nevertheless they were mentioned by the participants, especially when they talked about the help they got for their homework. As a welfare organisation, the Home has a pool of volunteers from all walks of life that come in to render their services in support of its programme. A consistent group would be the tutors who visit on different days during the study hours to help them in their academic work.

In the local society, it is very common for families to engage private tutors for their Primary School age children (*see 1.4.1*). This, however, was not likely to have had happened to the participants when they were with their family of origin due to the additional expenses and other reasons. Hence, through the volunteers, the Home had given them an opportunity to receive help for their schoolwork like many of their peers in school did. This was evidently a privilege to be appreciated, as it could be seen from their responses to the unfinished question, *The Home will be a better place for learning if.* One said *I have a volunteer to teach me what I do not know* and the other *there are a lot of teachers (see Table 7.2_Q11).*

Although the impact of these volunteers was not as prominent as compared to the staff' according to the data, their presence was vital in various ways. They were important aids to the Home in helping children cope with school demands. Their visits helped to enrich

looked after children's experience at the Home; and through constant and direct contact, they could become a source of encouragement to these children, especially in the area of their studies.

P4G: many tutors to encourage me in my studies.

Then again, there is certainly room for the effectiveness of this tuition programme to improve. As it was found in the former chapters, coming into the Home did not drastically revert the problem of looked after children's underachievement in school (*see 4.3.2*) and some of them continued to turn to their teachers and classmates for assistance (*see 6.3.2 & 6.4.3*). Such incongruity was perhaps due to the limitation these volunteers had in making a connection between academic needs and school demands; it was after all a voluntary programme and not all voluntary tutors were conversant with the teaching profession.

7.1.3 Peers

P6B: companies when I am lonely.

Besides the staff, Home placement introduced looked after children to a group of peers who may have come into care with a different past but are confronted by the same fate. Having been separated from their family of origin, their lives become intertwined with their peers' as they are cared for by the same group of adults, living in the same conditions, and likely to have similar school experiences. As such, relationships with peers in residential homes is believed to be more influential than relationships with adults (Berridge 2002). In the case of the Home in question, children in care were more than roommates. Older children were expected to be on a look out for the younger ones (*see 5.4.1*). And, when it comes to schoolwork, despite the presence of staff, peers would be asked to be their tutors.

Rachel (P2): (181) Cheryl, Shannon and Sam (301) some, some children teach us.

Benny (P5): (214) The only thing I know how to teach them is I tell them answer. I don't want to like what, tell them the working loh, I mental calculate, I tell them the answer.

While children's choice of friends is usually influenced by developmental and environmental issues such as similarity in age, sex, and background (Epstein 1989), the Home provides a natural platform for close relationship with peers to develop. This is why, in response to the question concerning what could be found in the Home, *friends* was the second highest in aggregate, a result which surpasses that for school (*compare Table 7.1_Q7 and 6.1_Q1*). The importance of these peers was further illustrated by the P6 boy when he said he found company when he was lonely. As for the P4 boy who was new at the Home and was having problems with his teachers and classmates in school, the Home was *very fun* because *friends* (were) *very good to me.*

Proximity had certainly helped to strengthen their tie. For those who attended the same school and happened to be in the same class, this friendship that stemmed from the Home could also be extended into school life. They would more often than not be hanging out together and become best friends.

Cheryl (P2): (117) I like Ricky, Rachel, Shannon and Sam, too.
Rachel (P2): (111) Yes, I like. I like Melissa, Cheryl, Shannon and Sam.

Besides Rachel and Cheryl, the other persons named to be their best friends were also from the Home. Such development is expected as Hartup (1998:153) has maintained, "Similar individuals cleave to one another more readily than dissimilar individuals because they are more likely to find common ground in both their activities and their conversations." Hence, although problems were dictated with classmates in school, they were less serious with peers at the Home. This was what happened to the P4 boy mentioned above and another P3 girl who did not think her classmates liked her. Although she also had very little to say about her school during the interview, she was confident that she had two good friends and they were both from the Home.

Mandy (P3): (285) I have this one [refer to Monica, the other interviewee]. And Oh Wen Long

While proximity and common ground had given the participants a good basis to hang out with peers from the Home, these might not be the only factors why they preferred to cling together in schools. In their responses to the question as to whether they like to attend the same school or even the same class with their peers from the Home, agreement prevailed *(see Table 7.3_Q6)*. Apparently, they were aware of other advantages of having peers from the Home as schoolmates or classmates. To begin with, it would mean availability of company, especially in cases that they did not start school at the official entry point or had experienced school transfer. Their preference resonates the findings that children who enter school with familiar peers experience more positive attitudes toward school and lower levels of school avoidance (Fuchs et al. 1994 cited in Dunlap 2002). In other words, having familiar faces in class can be helpful in boosting a child's morale.

In addition, staying close with peers from Home is likely to warrant a sense of continuity, security, and strength. According to the survey, a number of the respondents did not divulge their Home background in class (*see Table 6.7_Q5 & 6.4.4*). Their actions suggested that they were conscious about their different identity. Moreover, whereas unsatisfactory relations with peers in school was observed in the former chapter (*see 6.4.5*), it has not been a concern in the Home. Although there were tiffs and irritations, when asked what would make the Home a better place for learning, only one respondent related the issue to peers and it was having *more new friends* (*see Table 7.2_Q11*). The outcome is an obvious contrast in the case of school (*see Table 6.2_Q10*). Although the question on the Home emphasizes *learning* as oppose to *enjoyment*, relation with peers in the Home did appear to be more affable than in school.

Table 7.3_Q6

I like going to the same school (or maybe same class) with people from the Home.

Child	No		Maybe		Yes
001	1				
002					1
003					1
004					1
005					1
006					1
007			1		
008					1
009			1		
010	1				
011				1+	
012					1
013					1
014					1
015					1
016					1
017					1
018					1
019					1
020					1
021					1
022			1		
P4-6	2	0	3	1	16
023					1
024					1
025					1
026					1
027					1
028	1				
029					1
030					1
031					1
035			1		
032					1
033					1
034					1
039					1
040					1
041					1
036					1
037					1
038					1
P1-3	1	0	1	0	17

Kahan (1979), however, proposes that looked after children going to school as a group may have negative effect as they tend to influence one another and appear to be distinct from the rest. Although the participants had not elaborated on the consequences of socializing mainly with peers from the Home in school, their actions were likely to have cost them the freedom to mingle with the majority. By not taking advantage of the rich resources school as a neutral institution could offer, they deprived themselves the opportunity to be integrated into the larger society. The stake would even be higher when they do not get along. Their disagreement with each other will therefore be extended into the classroom. In the interviews, a P5 girl talked about her flare with a boy from the Home in school. There is a possibility that their conflicts would lead to a misconception of children from the Home.

7.1.4 Parents

Technically, *parents* should not have come under this section as they do not belong to the Home structure. Nonetheless, while the success of the Home is assessed by children's integration into their families (*see 5.2.1*) and it has been the Home's practice to engage parents in the care of their children (*see 5.3.1*), *parents* are not fully left out of the picture in public care. Brief as it may be in their references, the subject of *parents* continues to crop up although their roles and relation with their children in care were not purposefully sought in this study.

A case in point would be the identification of decision makers in the survey (*see Table 6.8_Q8a & 6.9_Q8b*). When children were asked to state the decision makers for various issues, many in the upper primary included their parents. Some of these results were due to a misunderstanding of the framework to have included their biological home. Nonetheless, parents' authority is evident in the aspects of their visits to the Home and children's choice of school.

While the tie was maintained, unlike their peers whose parents are likely an important asset in their education and school (Schor 1997:457), looked after children largely have parents who are preoccupied by troubles and have limited resources to take an active role in their schooling. In Kahan's (1979:22) words, "...they are basically inadequate, and

unable to offer the care, support and encouragement" to their children. The reality was confirmed by the results found in the interviews. When asked who was the person who cared the most about their studies, less than half gave credit to their parents, whereas the majority named either the staff or their teachers (*see 7.1.1 & 6.3.2*).

Jenny (P5): (365) Parents. (432) My father and my, ah my father and mother don't know lah.

Jareth (P4): (136) and my mother, and my father (236) Now, I very scared that I, I get scolding from my mother, I want to change

Serena (P6): (426) Our teachers and parents. Our teachers will care that we go to a good school and pass. Our parents will care for our future

According to the literature, parents remain a source of motivation for their children in care despite their inadequacy and shortcomings (*see 2.2.2 Parental expectation*). Hence, Jenny would rather believe her parents cared even though she was uncertain. For Jareth, his mother's scolding, though it worried him, worked as a motivation for him to change. Serena understood that her teachers would not be there for her for a long time; their care could only see her through some immediate hurdles. Attachment with parents, however, was meant to be life long, and so their care would be more enduring. These quotations are not only demonstrative of the various perceptions looked after children had on their parents, but also parents' significant role in their education. As for those who did not think their parents were at all cared about their education, other sources of motivation would have to be established to encourage hard work.

7.1.5 Conclusion

The section has explored the impact of various relations in the Home on looked after children's school experience. Staff were the ones who played an important role in filling the gap for parents. While different aspects of school were taken care of by different personnel, children in the Home generally felt supported. The programme coordinator even superseded parents to be the most prominent figure in caring for their education.

Nonetheless, not everyone's needs were met and this could be a result of structural deficiency.

One of the greatest assets of being in the Home for looked after children was perhaps the availability of help for homework. Besides the presence of staff and peers, a pool of volunteers was recruited to provide the much-needed assistance for them to cope with schoolwork. The organisation of this support, however, is to be re-evaluated because not only their general academic performance remained apprehensive, they continued to require the help of their teachers and peers in school.

Peers are people whom they shared many common experiences with. Due to proximity and common grounds, they were likely to have found solace in this level of relationship. Hence, the majority were in favour of being put in the same school and the same class. Those who were already put in the same class tend to cluster together; their closeness could cost them the opportunity to integrate into a neutral setting. Finally, parents, though not under the Home structure, continued to exert an influence on their children's school matters. Their relentless display of concern, irrespective of forms and expressions, had remained a source of motivation for some.

7.2 Environment that empowers

Besides people, the Home's environment is another crucial aspect of children's experience in placement. It denotes the organisation's policy, programme and physical planning. Since much of these features were found in the documentation presented in chapter five, this section draws mainly from children's responses in the interviews and survey. Its scope is thereby limited. Furthermore, there is a need to account for the major reconstruction the Home in question had undergone during the two phases of data collection. As a result of its transitory nature, a large part of the physical environment described in this framework might have to be considered temporary.

7.2.1 Programme

P4B: outings and Sunday-soccer training

In terms of programme, a main feature which was highlighted earlier would be the Home's stipulated study time in each segment of the day on school days. During this time, children would gather in clusters in the hall/canteen to do homework or study under a tutor (*see 5.4.1*). It is representative of the Home's effort to establish a platform that would contribute to children's learning in school. On top of this daily routine, there was evidence of other organized activities led primarily by sponsors or volunteers (*see 5.2.4 Human Resource*). The above quotation is one such example. Outings and soccer training were added by the P4 boy to the list of what he thought could be found in the Home (*see Table 7.1_Q7*). These were perhaps opportunities hard to come by if he hadn't been looked after in the institution. However, not everyone appreciated such exposure, especially when a choice to opt out was not given. When asked how her school results could be improved (*see Table 6.11_Q12*), other than working hard, a P4 girl had this to say:

P4G: also we can volunteer not to go outings but to study and work hard.

According to the annual reports of the Home, excursions, festive celebrations and parties were common events on its calendar, especially during weekends and school holidays. Yet, only two respondents had referred to it in the survey. While others' opinions towards these activities were unknown, the call for participation to be made optional would have its supporters. It is a wish in keeping with the arguments that children have rights to be heard and included in decision-making concerning their lives (Oliver 2006; Thomas 2005; etc). Conversely, learning was an important issue to several of the respondents in their responses to the unfinished question, *The Home will be a better place for learning if* (*see Table 7.2_Q11*).

P5G: I can learn new things
P2B: learn a lot of good things, sing songs to God
P1B: there are interesting thing to see/have many books
P1G: learn more things so when you grow up can earn more money, help mother buy things.

Although the survey had found that at least 85% of the respondents thought there were *many things to learn* in the Home (*see Table 7.1_Q7*), apart from *quiet place for reading,* the figure is comparatively lower among the upper primary respondents when it is compared to the other items. The quotations cited above have justified that some were indeed looking for a more enriching environment. They had wished that the Home could afford more resources to accommodate their interest in learning, a desire which, as mentioned, is natural in children (*see 6.1.2*).

Another feature of the Home would be its religious stance (*see 5.2.1*). Founded on the ground of Christian ideology, teachings about God were incorporated in its daily programme (*see 5.4.1 Practices & Rules*). The influence of this distinctive emphasis was apparent in both the interviews and survey where sporadic references were made to God. He was a source of power in their problems with passing their examination, behaviour and personal struggles.

Cheryl (P2): (242) When it's exam time, God, wo, when it's exam time, God (laugh) I pray to God and God (245) try to make me to (247) pass my exam but I failed.

Jareth (P4): (242) And I thank for God that I'm (244) not a stealer and a liar.

P4G: people like social workers who pray for me, tell me about God and encourage me to be strong.

Finally, privacy is understandably a luxury in any institutionalised communal setting. Still, a secure, caring and comfortable environment without bullying and delinquency was found to be desired by both social workers and young people (Sinclaire & Gibbs 1998:74). Hence, in their responses to the question on what makes a Home a better place for learning, there were calls for collective actions on obedience towards staff and good behaviour (*see Table 7.2_Q11*). Besides noise, stealing is another specifically identified problem they encountered in the Home. As a member of a community, the experience inadvertently had taught them that the behaviour of the individuals inevitably affects others living with them.

7.2.2 Physical environment

As mentioned the Home was going through reconstruction during the two phases of data collection, its noise level during this period was inevitably higher than usual. This has probably contributed to the fact that a *quiet place for reading* was found to be, among other items on the list, the most unavailable feature of the Home (*see Table 7.1_Q7*). However, a gap between the two age groups shows that while more than half of the upper primary had difficulty in locating a quiet place for reading, only a few lower primary children were bothered by the same problem. The lack of such a space, apparently, did not lie in the construction work but the different needs of the different age groups of children. Generally, upper primary students have more assignments to complete and materials to study, thus requiring a lengthier study time. The Home, however, was not designed to address such needs, as children were all gathered in the same open space during their daily study sessions. Once the younger children had completed their work, noise and disturbance could hardly be avoided.

P5B: everyone pays attention to what they are saying and be quiet when others are studying for their exam

In his response to what would make the Home a better place for learning *(see Table 7.2_Q11)*, this candid remark by a P5 boy revealed the frustration of those who tried to concentrate but yet did not have the cooperation of others. Unlike a P1 girl who was contented that she *can read in chapel (see Table 7.1_Q7)*, these older children needed an alternate place whereby they could carry on with self-study. Without such space, their learning would have to suffer.

In fact, noise was not the only problem looked after children had to deal with during study time. The dining hall where they gathered for studies was a sheltered open area. Since the local weather is usually humid, some believed that air-conditioning would serve to make the Home a better place for learning (*see Table 7.2_Q11)*. On the other hand, the open space allowed free visit from birds and caused the area to be stained by bird shit.

To some, this could be a distracting factor. In Davison's (1995:132) words, "providing and maintaining a quality environment is a pro-active task."

Lastly, a P6 girl hoped that children of the same age did not have to share room with the others. Indeed, the Home had a policy that put younger children, whether boys or girls, to room with the older girls so that their needs could be looked into, especially in the nights (*see 5.4.1*). There were perhaps some advantages in this caring process, like training the girls in taking responsibility, inculcating a loving and caring relationship in the community, etc. However, it also had its downside, especially from the perspectives of these girls as they were required to forgo their privacy.

7.2.3 Conclusion

By and large, the Home had worked towards providing a structured programme to its charges. Besides the emphasis on education, it also tried to expose them to different experiences through the help of volunteers or voluntary groups. Yet, without giving children a choice to opt out, these other activities could be perceived as a waste of time. Conversely, their expectation on the resources that cater to learning in the environment was not always met. The spiritual dimension in the programme had introduced looked after children to another source of help. Besides personal problems, as residents in the Home, they had to constantly guard their property against stealing and learn to put up with a boisterous crowd. Without the facilities to accommodate their needs for a quieter space, the noisy environment would pose a challenge to those who had either an interest in reading or a desire to excel in academic work. Ultimately, the Home had to evaluate its policy, programme and physical environment according to children's best interest (*see 2.3.5*).

7.3 Conclusions

In admitting children with needs for residential care, the Home has taken upon itself the responsibility of meeting not only the physical needs of these children, but also educational. The venture goes beyond arranging a placement in school or providing the

necessary schooling materials. Advocates have emphasized the needs for public carers to play the role of responsible parents (*see 2.2.1 Care Experience*, Holland & Randerson 2005:21) so as to ensure that children coming into care have an opportunity to revert their previous disadvantage and succeed in making the most of their potential. In its support for their intellectual development, the Home is practically a centre of empowerment.

Various issues have emerged from the discussion of looked after children's perspectives of the Home, namely the relational and environmental dimensions. To begin with, it was found that Home placement extended the relational horizon of these youngsters as a myriad of people were being introduced into their lives. The first significant group was the staff that took over from their parents in the provision of care. As it is known that people of different professions or skills were employed to play different roles, these roles would dictate the level of impact they had on different aspects of a child's life. As such, the programme coordinator was the most prominent figure in their school matters. While her fervour had made her the person who cared the most about their studies, her competence was challenged by the population size and staggered placements of the Home. Thus, not all had felt that their educational needs could be met in the Home.

Staff might be significant in shaping the living condition of looked after children, peers, however, were essentially the ones exerting an influence on their experiences in the Home. These people shared their destiny as well as circumstances. Their lives were so interwoven that any display of emotion, behaviour and attitude, be it positive or negative, by one person would have an impact on the others. Nonetheless, proximity and common grounds had undoubtedly brought them closer together. It was found that their friendship in the Home appeared to be more salient than in school. A concern was when several of them were enrolled in the same school and put in the same class. Their closeness could have discouraged them from seeking integration with the rest and thereby prevented them from taking advantage of school being a centre of normalisation.

One of the important tasks of this chapter is to survey the relation between Home placement and looked after children's education. It is unquestionable that the Home was able to provide a better environment for academic support as compared to their family of origin. In the Home, children were bound by a routine that included regular study time so

that they could complete their daily homework and learn the syllabus. Should they encounter any difficulty, help was easily accessible as there were staff, peers and voluntary tutors who could teach. However, regardless of these efforts, some continued to go back to their teachers and classmates for help and few had shown immense improvement in their school results. As found, there appeared to be some deficiencies in the measures taken. Although there were voluntary tutors, they came from all walks of life and might not be conversant with the curriculum. Amidst the noisy environment, children did not have an alternate quieter space for self-study. What's more, some found the environment lacked resources that encourage learning and their personal interest was not always taken into consideration when there were organized activities.

This chapter closes the entire analysis work of the Home background and children's perspectives. Next, I will look at the findings found in the four chapters and discuss their implications, in particular what they mean to the Home and school. It will be the final chapter that marks the end of the study.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

A summary and its implications

The study set out with an understanding that issues concerning the education of looked after children were largely overlooked by local researchers. Being a minority in the mainstream school, these children must have needs that warrant some attention from the public carers, school personnel, policy makers, and society at large. Besides, it was highlighted in the introduction and literature review chapters that education has significant implications not only in their current well-being but also future success. Insofar as research into this field was necessary, a boundary was set to focus the study on the voices of looked after children in the aspect of their school experience.

This focus was developed into three research questions: 1) *What have the children experienced in school*? 2) *How do they feel about these experiences*? and 3) *To what extent are the children's experiences and feelings related to their background?* Its predetermined direction has called for a descriptive and interpretive research. In considering the approach, practical constraints such as current research and the researcher's personal limitations were factored in. Finally, a mixed method approach was employed while only one children's residential home was selected and the scope denoted a population of only children in mainstream Primary School.

To enhance validity and generalizability of the study, four instruments were designed to be executed in four phases. The first phase collected data of the Home's demography which comprised mainly children's placement history and school performance. The second phase involved sampling children for interviews, with the aim of answering the first two research questions. Six school-related themes were used to solicit responses and they were their perspectives of school, relationship with teachers, relationship with peers, motivation in learning, practical help in the Home and their future. Thirdly, documents were gathered to produce a synopsis of the Home structure and environment. The final tool was a questionnaire survey formulated on the basis of previous findings and

purposefully capturing the participation of the whole population so that respondents' validation for the research could be achieved.

Method of analysis varies according to the type of instruments. For quantitative data, while the population size was small, the approach involved mainly tabulation. Analysis of qualitative data was more complex as steps were taken to attain a grounded analysis of participants' views. The process has resulted in the development of eight themes; six targeted on schools and two the Home. While the themes concerning schools were the main thrust of the study, those that concerned the Home were evocative of the environment that has a significant impact on their experiences in school.

To bring the research to a conclusion, there are still three tasks to be completed in this chapter. First, it will provide a summary of the main findings from the four instruments and they are organized according to those concerning school and the Home. Next, implications from these findings for the two institutions will be presented and lastly, recommendations for future research will also be made.

8.1 A summary of the main findings

8.1.1 Concerning School

The topic has put school in the centre of focus, given its immense influence in the lives of looked after children. As it was found, their experiences did have a bearing on their intellectual development, social world and personal growth. School was established to be a centre of normalization as it had provided them a sense of normality through its multi-faceted facilities and opportunities to be connected with society at large. These features, however, varied in their appeals due to differentiation of application as well as characteristics among recipients. The findings are grouped in two categories: *the advantages of schooling* and *challenges in schools.*

The advantages of schooling

Apparently, school embodied a wide-ranging exposure that was able to address different aspects of children's developmental needs. *Play*, *Recess* and *Physical Education* were by far the most popular segments of school life among the primary school age interviewees. Since children were largely acting and socializing on their own terms during these periods of time, they carried emotional and social value, which were thought to have special meaning for looked after children. The *academic programme* drew attention to children's natural desire to learn. Besides having some keen learners among the participants, many were able to make a connection between school and their future chances in career choice or independent living. The *enrichment programmes* were well received when the nature was primarily interactive and creative, of which *Computer Lesson* had witnessed the greatest draw. Apart from enlarging their horizon, these lessons were vital in equipping them for the future challenges and integration. All in all, school was both pleasurable and important to most of these children. It had not only given them something different from their background but also experiences common to the majority.

Compensation was also found from their social network in school, and it was composed of two main levels of interactions. Adoration for teachers went beyond appearance, personality and style. Teachers were in a strategic position that could make a difference in looked after children's school experience. They played a significant role in motivating and supporting their learning. While many of these children were without healthy parental guidance, teachers' awareness and responses to their personal needs were often helpful not only in providing guidance and resolutions to their predicaments but also encouragement. As such, teachers had become a significant figure in their lives and the younger they were, the more they relied on their teachers' initiations.

Relation with classmates, on the other hand, bore a rather different meaning to these young people. Except for familial background, they might have shared many traits with these peers. As they learnt and played together, resources and information were shared in a more egalitarian manner albeit that the participants were evidently more likely to be at the receiving end. These peers provided the much needed companionship and support, which, at times, even involved their family members and in turn allowed participants the experience of family warmth that may be missing from their lives. The older they were,

the more they looked to their peers for cues and approval, especially in the areas of behaviour, attitude and decision-making. Getting along with classmates was a step forward to future social integration.

The challenges in school

The demographic study had uncovered two concerns. First, there were proportionately more looked after children at the lower end of academic achievement than in the case of the majority. Second, form teachers of looked after children did not necessarily know about their placement background. Although school was found to be a haven for many participants, it had its own challenges.

To begin with, school had been a competitive ground, with its demand and expectation levelled at children with home support. Most looked after children came from families beset by meagre material and emotional assets. As found from studies (Osborn 1990; Bebbinton & Miles 1989, etc), their early experience in life had put them at a disadvantage that would consequently affect their ability to cope in school. Some were further affected by disruptions such as non-attendance or involuntary school transfer. Invariably, without adequate support or professional interventions, it would be hard for them to take advantage of school. Some found school a boredom, others complained about the overwhelming homework and teachers' attitude.

Assimilation was a challenge for many of these children. Some, having been transferred from another school due to placement, were adamant that they fitted better in their former school. It was also found that older children appeared to be more isolated. Moreover, reluctance to divulge their stay in the residential home and predilection to hang out with peers from the Home were all telling signs that adjustment to the school environment required some effort. If teachers were not informed or trained to tackle their problems, few would be able to prevail over these challenges in school.

8.1.2 Concerning the Home

While school was a centre of normalization, the Home was established as a centre of empowerment in view of its role and responsibility to redress looked after children's disadvantages in school. Although the study did not intend to evaluate the Home's effectiveness in playing its role, children's perspectives concerning the Home's support were gathered to allow a glimpse into their living condition, a circumstance that set them apart from their peers in school. Findings are categorized according to features that were conducive or unhelpful for the children's school progress.

Features for school progress

The greatest resource of the Home for looked after children coping with school demands would be its availability of help when there was a need. Their resource pool encompassed staff, voluntary tutors and peers. Staff were employed to fill different roles; those with direct impact would be the director, social workers, programme coordinator and housemothers. Besides care, these people were also significant in providing the much needed guidance as well as role models. The programme coordinator who had a chief responsibility over their school matters was to many the person who cared the most about their studies. Besides schoolwork, any report of misconduct in school would be followed up in the Home.

If the staff were bound by their prescribed duties, there were volunteers who made regular visits to coach them in their schoolwork. Moreover, help could also be sought from peers in the Home. Peers were important companions as they shared common destinies and experiences in the new environment. With the benefit of proximity, their friendship appeared to be more salient than in schools. Hence, many were in favour of attending the same school and the same class with peers from the Home. Although, with hindsight, such clustering was thought to be unhelpful for their integration, the presence of these peers could be useful buffer in times of adjustment.

Besides people, the Home had also a programme that addressed their educational needs as students. This was mainly supported by a fixed schedule of study time during school days, when children had to convene at a common place to complete their homework or have tuition classes provided by volunteers. In addition to its academic focus, the Home

had also tried to organize activities that offered a more balance environment to schooling children through the help of volunteers.

Features against school progress

Despite the abovementioned efforts, it was found in the demographic study that children's length of stay at the Home did not appear to have a significant impact on their school progress. While there might be various reasons for the result, the Home's features would be deliberated here.

A survey of the Home's policy and practices had shown that professional educational intervention was not common for looked after children in the mainstream school. Their care plan did not incorporate a personalized educational plan that is offered to their western counterparts. Although there was an emphasis on education, its top priority was evidently to pave ways for looked after children to be successfully restored in their families.

On the other hand, there was no official requirement for staff and school personnel to meet periodically to assess children's adjustment, conduct and progress, and exchange views. Neither was children's participation in decision-making such as the choice of school was encouraged. The lack of such stipulation was perhaps part of the reasons some children were not adapting in school.

In the Home, a parent's role was divided and performed by different adult individuals. The strengths of such organization lay in its provision for specialization and professionalism, but it might also come across as confusing and impersonal to children, especially in view of the population size. Eventually, some had resorted to disregard the resources available in the Home but sought help from teachers and schoolmates for their schoolwork.

Finally, although there was a structured time for learning, children were gathered in a common sheltered space where they had to bear with the heat of local weather and noise. There was also a lack of private space for reading and certain facilities, such as the

refurbishment of a computer room were slow to come into view. That said, these could also be temporary factors since the Home was undergoing reconstruction when the study was conducted.

8.2 Some implications from the main findings

Implications of the findings apply to both schools and the Home. Some are likely to argue that the mainstream schools serve the interests of the general public and so it is unreasonable to expect it to function mainly to meet the needs of looked after children. However, quality education takes into consideration the individual's diversity and addresses the needs of the minority. Hence, both residential homes and schools ought to operate on the basis of children's best interests. Here are some areas to be considered based on the findings:

Schools

Apparently, information is crucial in meeting the needs of looked after children. School personnel should be informed of their students' care situation. Such knowledge is believed to be able to enhance teachers' ability to build rapport with these children and provide more specific guidance. Although the survey had shown that not all participants wanted their teachers to know about their placement background, their reservation only indicates that there is a need for information to go beyond a superficial awareness. It requires teachers to be equipped with knowledge of translating information into action plans and kept abreast with the development of their students. This leads to two preconditions:

a) The first condition has to do with teacher training. There was clear evidence in the data that teachers played an important role in the experiences of looked after children in school and were likely to have an impact on their progress. Their effectiveness in addressing the needs of looked after children would be raised through formal training, which includes an introductory course on the characteristics of looked after children, the possible impact of Home placement, the roles of public carers and social workers, etc.

These are fundamental knowledge to be acquired for the benefit of a more effective pedagogy.

b) Next, inter-professional collaboration should be encouraged in order that looked after children's educational needs are evaluated and addressed by the concerted effort of teachers and social workers/carers. As shown in the literature review (*see 2.3.1*), studies in the United Kingdom have led to the advocacy of regular review meetings between school personnel and social worker/carer, possibly even the child in question. The gathering is meant to provide an opportunity for communication that aims at improving looked after children's experiences and performance in school. During the session, the two main parties will exchange views concerning the child's development and progress. Although such communication may have been taking place in the local arena, it is likely to be spontaneous and relies greatly on the initiation of the individuals.

The Home

While the Home has purposefully accommodated children's needs for school support in its staffing and programme, the study has shown that greater emphasis on looked after children's school progress is indeed necessary. Besides the earlier suggestion of making review meetings with teachers a routine, the following measures are recommended for the enhancement of the Home's facilitation:

a) A useful starting point would be the introduction of a personalized educational plan to be incorporated in children's care plan, as found in the literature review (*see 2.3.4*). The purpose of this educational plan is to ensure that each child will be assessed on his/her personal educational needs, so that scheme of support could be deliberated based on the results and professional intervention considered at an earlier stage of his/her placement. The plan is also useful in the review meeting with teacher for the assessment of the child's progress.

b) Although the Home's tuition programme is an important provision in support of looked after children's education, as it appears in the data, its effectiveness could be raised by a more proactive recruitment of tutors. Due to the background, these

children are likely to be in need of more specific guidance, especially when they are displaying learning difficulties. Tutors who possess some knowledge of school curriculum and pedagogy are believed to be in better position to coach them in their studies.

c) The structured study time is another important feature of the Home in helping children to meet school's expectation. However, the data from the children indicated that having all children under one roof may be a practical approach for staff's supervision, it does not make a conducive environment for learning. As different children have different needs at different times, having a space to accommodate those who wish to read or do their work quietly is therefore necessary.

d) Finally, it may not be a topic widely discussed in the local society as compare to UK (*see 1.4.3*), but children's right to participate in decision-making in matters concerning themselves is often overlooked conveniently. The study has shown that they seem to be in need of some control in areas such as choice of school and participation in certain programme. Their views, if respected, are likely to instil a sense of identity and encourage responsibility. While there are many aspects of decision-making in the Home, the management could decide on the areas where their voices should be heard and make it a practice of the Home.

8.3 Recommendations for future research

As mentioned, there has been a lack of research on the subject of looked after children and their education in Singapore (*see 1.4.4*). While the study has attempted to understand children's perspectives, it has its limitations as spelled out in the introduction chapter. This topic definitely deserves greater attention from the local policy makers and researchers. Here are some recommendations for future research:

a) As the study focuses on primary school children and their perspectives of school, there is a need for other perspectives to emerge if a more comprehensive understanding of the issue is to be attained. Besides carers, social workers and

teachers, teenagers who are being looked after in a residential home should also be sought for their views as they are likely to be more reflective due to their maturity. The views of the service providers, as those named in above, will bring to the subject new standpoints as they are observing from different angles and tend to unravel the issue according to their professionalism.

b) Apparently, generalizability of this study is limited as it involves only one residential Home. Besides extending the study to other Homes, there remains a need for some national statistics to be published on these children. Information is required on areas such as the estimated number of children looked after in residential care, their overall results in Primary School Leaving Examination and GCE 'O' level, their average highest school attainment and employment prospect, etc.

c) To improve the Home's effectiveness in supporting children's schooling, an evaluation of the Home's policy, programmes and environment will likely be necessary. Besides, explanatory research can also be carried out for certain programmes so as to identify features that encourage school progress.

d) One last suggestion stems ~~from the need for an~~ educational psychological approach to looked after children's education. The study can aim at unravelling the impact of placement on children's education or identifying factors that motivate children in the Home to learn. Some possibilities include parent's involvement, teacher's expectation, staff's conscious effort and peer's influence.

8.4 Reflections

The thesis, from conception to completion, took a period of four years. The topic was first chosen on the ground of personal interest, as mentioned in the introduction in chapter 1. At that juncture, I did not know of any research with a similar focus and also lacked knowledge and training experience in social work. To begin with, there was a need for me to acquire a general understanding of public care services for children in Singapore. The early stage was thus marked by initiations to meet up with people in the

social work profession and search for related literature. Consequently, the research had a slow start.

The first breakthrough came when I discovered that the topic had in recent years witnessed a spur of interest among researchers in UK and perhaps other European countries. Their works had not only confirmed the value of the study, but also provided a significant framework for the formulation of the research questions and approach.

On the other hand, the lack of similar academic works in Singapore means greater effort was needed in designing a sound and meaningful research. The task was complicated by the fact that the study involved a residential home where the most vulnerable children were at stake. Hence, the process entailed many levels of consideration, which included the theoretical underpinnings of the approach, workable applications for a specific goal and setting, their ethical concerns, and availability of resources. A perfect model that fits all situations is simply impossible and the decision of adopting an mixed method approach was to minimise its possible impacts on the children and the Home. It was a weighty and tedious process. Moreover, the design comprised four instruments. In the development, except for the preliminary study, the actual formulation of one often relied on some analytical work done on another.

In the end, I think the most rewarding time of doing research is when field work takes place. From gaining access to conducting a survey among children, it was a time when theories were put into action and tested. Success in execution depended very much on my preparation and ability to adapt to various situations. I was fortunate to meet a director who was approachable and supportive of the research. However, while the research site was expected to be ever changing, major changes like the expansion of services, reconstruction of buildings and resignation of the director had somewhat caught me by surprise. Another thing to note is that as reference books on research methodology were mainly written in the western countries, not all were applicable in the local setting. Measures like ethical code on interviewing children may be a prime concern denoted in the literature, but it has yet to draw critical attention in Singapore and such stipulation was not found. Nonetheless, as a researcher, and as required by the University of

Durham, it was my responsibility to ensure that basic principles of an ethical approach were maintained throughout the study.

The completion of the research marks the milestone of an accomplishment. Not only all my endeavours have finally come to an end, it is my hope that the completion of this work will lead to further interest in the topic. While the government has made many efforts in enhancing the educational system to ensure flexibility and inclusiveness, it can certainly do more to look into the needs of looked after children.

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