

# The educational performance of children in need and children looked after

## The majority of looked after children do not have special needs; they are capable of normal levels of achievement.

The Quality Protects initiative measures educational progress positively by attainment (National Curriculum, GCSEs and GNVQs) and negatively by school exclusions and trancies. The performance indicators and targets are the National Curriculum tests, SATs, GCSE and GNVQ results, unauthorised absences from school and permanent school exclusions. Comparisons are made between children in need, children looked after and the whole population of children in a local authority.

### THE POPULATION

The sub-objectives refer to a rather uncertainly defined umbrella population of children in need, from which the following overlapping categories are drawn:

- children looked after
- children out of school, including those formally or informally excluded, truants and persistent non-attenders
- children with special education needs (SEN), some of whom have statements of special needs. This heterogeneous group includes many of those who are registered disabled and those who have been assessed as having emotional and behavioural disorders (EBD).

This briefing relates mainly to the first two categories.

### POOR EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

The National Child Development Study showed that in 1981 43% of care leavers had no qualifications compared with 16% for matched non-care school leavers. More recent studies have indicated this to be an optimistic estimate, some suggesting that as few as 25% of care leavers gain only one GCSE. Around 40% of care leavers are likely to be without employment.

There are some obvious reasons for the low level of educational performance. Children will often have had educational problems before reaching public care. They need extra support to be able to compensate for early disadvantage, but it is often made worse by what they experience subsequently. Some of the factors that must be reckoned with are:

- difficulty in obtaining school places for children in public care as a result of the admission procedures or stigmatization
- low expectations by teachers and the low priority given to education by many social workers and residential care staff
- the mistaken assumption that most or all looked after children have a learning difficulty
- lack of continuity in care from families and social workers. Frequent placement moves can result in unsettled schooling and difficulties in sustaining relationships with peers and adults. Broken schooling and periods out of school can result in poor motivation and continuing poor attendance.

sub-objective 3.r: to help improve the educational attainment of children in need  
 sub-objective 4.r: to bring the overall performance in National Curriculum tests of children looked after for a year or more closer into line with local children generally

Research on young people's perspectives about their education whilst in public care is in short supply, but the experience of disrupted education caused by frequent placement moves is commonly reported.

The focus on the poor individual performance of children in need was given a fresh perspective by the 1995 OFSTED/SSI joint inspection which emphasised how agencies were failing to work together to secure children's entitlement to education and their inclusion in mainstream practice. In particular it highlighted:

- the low priority given to education by professionals working with looked after children, with no single carer taking responsibility
- a lack of co-ordination between agencies, compounded by different obligations and priorities
- negligible training on the specific education issues
- inadequate communication and information management, and the absence of a tradition of data collection and analysis.

#### CHILDREN OUT OF SCHOOL

Although national targets have been set to reduce the number of school exclusions by one third before the year 2002, the scale of the problem is hard to quantify. Statistics on children permanently excluded represent only a proportion of exclusions, but over recent years numbers appear to have been rising consistently, especially among younger pupils. Social disadvantage is a common theme; children in public care, travellers, young carers and children with SEN, African Caribbean pupils and boys are particularly at risk.

It has been estimated that up to 30% of children in public care are out of mainstream education at any moment, whether through exclusion or truancy. The situation is far worse in residential care where non-attendance is often the norm. Frequent placement breakdown will add to this risk.

The longer a young person is out of school, the harder it is for him or her to reintegrate. Separate on-site support units have yet to have much positive impact on exclusion or suspension figures though school-based social workers or education welfare officers have been shown to be effective. Being out of school has other undesirable short and longer term consequences, with increased cost to society. For example:

- the majority of young people excluded from school fail to complete their schooling; excluded pupils have been estimated to receive, on average, less than 10% of full-time schooling
- truants are more likely to leave school with few or no qualifications. The latest youth cohort study (1998) showed that 31% of truants reported having no GCSEs compared with 4% of non-truants
- being out of school is a contributory factor to family breakdown, insecure employment and increased involvement in crime.

Maintaining children in school is therefore of critical importance to everyone.

## WHAT EDUCATION CAN DO

- If a corporate parent can support the education of the children they look after, they are providing them with one of the most reliable means of escape from disadvantage.
- Research shows the importance of educational attainment to all aspects of adult life - to health as much as career opportunities and income levels.
- Educational achievement makes the public care experience more bearable as well as leading to better career prospects.
- Involvement in school life can provide much more than educational qualifications: it can contribute to confidence, self-esteem, and the development of life-skills, thereby promoting a resilience to cushion young people against the effects of adversity.

## RESPONSIBILITIES

Local authorities are required to establish a base-line of data and to seek improvements on the educational performance of children in need, especially those looked after. Schools routinely collect performance data and are now required to identify children looked after. Better data may strengthen the case for helping vulnerable children and forge closer links between the agencies which collect and analyse the information.

It is useful to understand the climate for inter-agency work. Local education authorities work in the context of a package of Government policies, such as Excellence in Cities, Sure Start, Education Action Zones and Healthy Schools Schemes which are intended to overcome social exclusion and disadvantage. A duty to respond to the educational needs of looked after children is placed on them by the School Standards and Framework Act, 1998. From 2002, LEAs must ensure that all excluded pupils receive suitable full-time education.

School responsibilities include the formulation of behaviour support policies, pastoral support programmes, personal education plans, school exclusion policies and study support programmes. They must identify looked after children and are advised to assign a teacher to oversee their needs.

For SSDs, the context is established through Quality Protects Management Action Plans and Children's Service Plans which must indicate how a local authority plans to improve the life chances of looked after children.

There is also encouragement for SSDs, LEAs and schools to work together, since Children's Service Plans and Education Development Plans required by different agencies are complementary in their approach. Both the Children Act 1989 and the Education Act 1996 emphasise the need for joint working.

The Government has provided recent guidance instructing SSDs and LEAs to collaborate in meeting educational targets. It deals with looked after children, guidance on school inclusion, truancy and school exclusion. New DH/DfEE guidance (April/May 2000) on the education of looked after children now requires the following from local authorities:

- the development of personal education plans for each child
- a protocol for collecting and sharing relevant information on children in public care between agencies
- ensuring education placements are always made at the same time as care placements
- a maximum time out of education of 20 school days whilst care placements are being made.

## A PREVENTIVE APPROACH

Much of the research has identified problems and sought solutions through better and more consistent inter-agency co-operation or area-based initiatives at the whole school level. These approaches avoid the stigma associated with individuals. The whole school approach can be augmented by activity at the level of individual children's needs in school or even pre-school.

Such interventions have been evaluated in the United States but not in Britain; if they are to be replicated successfully, the original conditions and the critical ingredients need to be translated. They include:

- Programmes such as 'Headstart' and 'High/Scope Perry preschool programme' for the pre-school years which have shown gains in cognitive ability, self-esteem, educational achievement, motivation and social behaviour. They may particularly help the most disadvantaged, are cost-effective and associated with better results at school and later. However, the benefits may take years to show.
- Sure Start is a UK national programme which aims to replicate American initiatives in the most disadvantaged areas. It collaborates with parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of pre-school children.

## SPECIFIC 'AT RISK' GROUPS

### LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

There are many case studies of initiatives to improve the educational attainment of children in public care but, again, a shortage of reliable evaluation. However, research indicates that certain factors are crucial to the educational success of young people in or leaving care, just as they are to any other young person:

- stability and continuity in care (QP has set targets to promote these)
- learning to read early (before the age of 8) and fluently
- having a parent or carer who values education and sees it as a route to a good life
- having friends outside care who do well at school
- developing out of school interests and hobbies
- meeting a significant adult who offers consistent encouragement as a mentor, role model or champion.

### CHILDREN OUT OF SCHOOL

A number of factors that contribute to the risk of school exclusion will always rest with the child and family, but schools and how they manage behaviour policies are an important influence. Social services departments are becoming increasingly involved and are extending their brief to include in-school preventive work. There is little evidence that exclusion is the most effective way to deal with disaffection and it is therefore important that resources are targeted to support schools, families and other services to prevent exclusion and maintain children in school. There are many examples of local practice that aim to do this.

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- Schools can cut truancy by acting quickly and consistently and always contacting parents immediately children are reported absent. Discipline and behaviour policies are most likely to be effective if they are enforced through clear rules, rewards and incentives rather than focusing on punishment.
- Mentoring and befriending schemes that aim to build self-esteem and help motivate children are most successful when they match the ethnic background, gender and community of origin.
- School-based programmes can lessen anxiety and increase the ability of children to deal with emotional conflict. Peer led life skills programmes have been shown to improve school attendance and reduce problem behaviour, especially among adolescents.
- Parent education programmes can also remedy behaviour problems in young children, especially when they include a behavioural/cognitive component.
- A national network of homework clubs, study support centres and summer schools has been established to complement the mainstream. They aim to promote learning methods which appeal to the specific needs of demotivated pupils.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE

There is much evidence to show that the educational experience of children in need can be improved, but relatively little on whether this advance significantly improves educational attainment. Studies that track changes over time are rare. Too often, programmes are adapted piecemeal from one locality to another, when effective replication requires a good conceptual grasp of the original programme and of how essential elements can be transferred. However, some clear principles and practices emerge that front-line staff and managers should consider.

## SIMPLE THINGS FRONT-LINE WORKERS CAN TRY

- Remember that, left unattended, a looked after child's chances of educational success are lower than all other children's - **your actions count.**
- Buy a book for a child every few weeks - help him or her to make a collection.
- Involve everyone who can help - the child's carer, form tutor, mentor, a family friend - don't think you have to do it alone.
- Alert yourself to what is available for the child at school - subject choices, extra curricular activities like sport or music, school outings - and help him or her to take advantage.
- Mark signs of success in tests, in exams, in commendations, in extra curricular activity: pay for an outing, take photos, get your agency to hold an annual awards ceremony, give a present.
- Help with homework: discuss it, create the right atmosphere, make sure the study planner is signed.
- Encourage effort: ask if the school gives effort grades.
- Imagine yourself as the parent - what would you do to promote your child's enjoyment and achievement in school?

## MORE SIMPLE THINGS FRONT-LINE WORKERS CAN TRY

- Listen to the child's half of the story - show that he or she can chew over a next move with someone who's on their side.
- Go to a parents' evening: decide with the child who to see, encourage him or her to get the appointments, talk beforehand and afterwards.
- Read all reports on your child's progress in the year, in their SATS, in their GCSE or A-level mocks, on the effort grades they have been given - and discuss them with the child.
- Find out who are the key people in your child's schooling - their tutor, their subject teachers, their Key Stage principal.

## AN AGENDA FOR LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITIES AND SOCIAL SERVICES

- **Gain political support**  
Political ownership and leadership are essential for achieving policy change within local government (ie Councillors) and schools (ie Governors). Make education of children in need a priority issue.
- **Introduce measures at all levels**  
Individual projects may not be effective unless they are part of a strategy to promote the education, including higher education, of looked after children. Measures need to embrace policy and action at the level of the individual child, while taking account of their ethnic and cultural background. Financial backing will be required as indicated in the Children Act guidance.
- **Ensure inter-agency support/joint working between LEAs, SSDs and schools**  
Develop an integrated approach to service provision with close collaboration between agencies and a clear understanding of respective roles and responsibilities for vulnerable children. Children's Service Plans and Personal Education Plans provide an opportunity to plan and review services regularly.
- **Link leisure, culture and education**  
Ensure that looked after children have access to local cultural and leisure facilities, including art and sport. Life chances can be improved by developing skills and self esteem through these activities .
- **Focus on prevention**  
Broaden interventions beyond children in public care to include pre-school programmes that target those at risk at younger ages or that aim to maintain vulnerable children in schools. This may prove to be the most cost effective approach in the long-term.
- **Maximise stability and continuity**  
School can provide one element of stability, continuity and belonging in an otherwise disrupted life. Make sure that education placements are secured at the same time as care placements. Provide local placements wherever possible to reduce disruption to the child. If this is not possible consider enabling the child to travel to his or her existing school.
- **Assign responsibility**  
Ensure that there is a named person at senior level in the local authority with responsibility for establishing and enforcing joint policies, procedures and protocols on the education of children in public care and for maintaining children in schools. Likewise, make education a priority as a corporate parent by ensuring there is a designated person (eg a mentor) who takes a consistent

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interest in a child's progress. This person might be a school worker, social worker, education support worker or independent visitor. The continued involvement of families in their children's progress should be encouraged.

- **Consider the educational background of foster carers**  
Over two thirds of children looked after away from home are in family foster care: in selecting foster carers, SSDs have traditionally put greater emphasis on carers' ability to provide emotional rather than educational support. Educational support should be made an explicit part of a carer's role and the necessary training and support provided. Young people's need for study space should be acknowledged.
- **Provide a stable base through secondary education**  
Residential units and foster carers should be expected to provide a home at least up to 18 or until the young person has completed secondary education. The practice of moving children to independent living facilities at 16 may be highly damaging to their education.
- **Gather reliable data to inform and challenge policy and practice**  
Whether to improve performance of looked after children or reduce school exclusions, the establishment of baseline data and coherent monitoring systems between schools, LEAs and SSDs will help inform the development of inter-agency strategies.
- **Consult young people and and their families**  
Seek the views of parents and children at every stage and at every level. The QP initiative requires that local authorities listen to the views of young people and their families to help plan and deliver services.
- **Improve training**  
Raise the awareness of education and social care staff about the respective responsibilities, priorities and workings of different agencies, the experiences of service users, and effective interventions.

## SCHOOLS

Many schools already use a variety of approaches to tackle issues that may help children in need, eg policies to counter discrimination and bullying, involve children in the running and management of schools, provide specialist support and training for behaviour management. Schools also need to recognise a special obligation to support looked after children, using an approach which acknowledges the particular difficulties they have had to face.

- **Designate a nominated member of staff to have responsibility for the needs of children in public care and to promote school inclusion (eg to draw up Personal Education Plans, attend SSD meetings; review Care Plans; liaise with the SSD and LEA; promote good working relationships with foster carers, mentor or natural parents; ensure access to extra-curricular activities and facilities, such as study support opportunities).**
- **Provide continuity of educational records in the case of transfer to another school.**
- **Build positive home-school relations between parents and carers with regular opportunities for dialogue.**
- **Encourage looked after children to continue to further or higher education.**

## KEY RESOURCES

## RESEARCH

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