

The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data

Research Team: Professor Judy Sebba, Professor David Berridge, Professor Steve Strand, Professor Sally Thomas, Dr Nikki Luke, Dr John Fletcher, Dr Karen Bell, Professor Ian Sinclair, Aoife O'Higgins

This research project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, was jointly undertaken by the University of Bristol and the Rees Centre, Department of Education, University of Oxford.

It is the first major study in the UK to explore the relationship between educational outcomes, young people's care histories and individual characteristics. It links the National Pupil Database and the Children Looked After Database for the cohort who were eligible to take GCSEs in 2013.

The main analysis concentrated on the progress at secondary school (Key Stages 2-4) of young people who had been in care for over a year at the end of Key Stage 4. Detailed statistical analysis was complemented by interviews with 26 young people in six local authorities and with adults significant in their educational careers, including foster carers, teachers, social workers and Virtual School headteachers.

Key Findings

What are the key factors contributing to the low educational outcomes of young people in care in secondary schools in England? The analysis reveals that controlling for all factors, the following contribute to the educational progress of young people in care:

- **Time in care.** Young people who have been in longer-term care do better than those 'in need' but not in care, and better than those who have only been in short term care – so it appears that care may protect them educationally.
- **Placement changes.** Each additional change of care placement after age 11 is associated with one-third of a grade less at GCSE.
- **School changes.** Young people in care who changed school in Years 10 or 11 scored over five grades less than those who did not.
- **School absence.** For every 5% of possible school sessions missed due to unauthorised school absences, young people in care scored over two grades less at GCSE.
- **School exclusions.** For every additional day of school missed due to fixed-term exclusions, young people in care scored one-sixth of a grade less at GCSE.
- **Placement type.** Young people living in residential or another form of care at age 16 scored over six grades less than those who were in kinship or foster care.
- **School type.** Young people who were in special schools at age 16 scored over 14 grades lower in their GCSEs compared to those with the same characteristics who were in mainstream schools. Those in pupil referral units with the same characteristics scored almost 14 grades lower.
- **Educational support.** Young people report that teachers provide the most significant educational support for them but teachers suggest that they need more training to do this effectively.

Policy and Practice Implications

- The progress of children in care shows much variation, which suggests that any interventions need to be tailored to the characteristics and experiences of the individual.
- Education needs to be supported at a much younger age and while children are still living with their birth families, in order to reduce later difficulties relating to adolescence.
- Greater focus on *progress* over time is needed and recognition that some young people take longer to make significant progress.
- When placement moves are essential, school moves should be avoided especially in the final years of schooling.
- Children in care should be placed in mainstream schools with appropriate support wherever possible.
- We need to support young people in care to achieve high attendance at school and we need to support schools not to exclude them.
- Schools that benefit all children are likely to benefit those in care so prioritizing their admission is justified.
- Teachers need better understanding of children's social, emotional and mental health problems; social workers need better understanding of the education system.
- Schools and local authorities should use extra help such as paired reading and one-to-one tuition that are supported by evidence.
- The Virtual Schools, schools, social workers and foster carers should work closely together and involve the young person in decisions affecting them.

Further Information

To find out more about the research:

<http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/research/educational-progress-of-looked-after-children/>

<http://www.bris.ac.uk/sps/research/>

<http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/educational-progress-looked-after-children>

The overview report is available in hard copy and on the websites of the Rees Centre, University of Bristol and the Nuffield Foundation. To request a free copy, please send an email to rees.centre@education.ox.ac.uk

Contact

Professor Judy Sebba, University of Oxford judy.sebba@education.ox.ac.uk

Professor David Berridge, University of Bristol david.berridge@bristol.ac.uk

Acknowledgement

This project was funded by the Nuffield Foundation but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

