

Educational outcomes of children in care – recent research

Date 7 January 2016
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Summary

The Rees Centre at the University of Oxford and the University of Bristol have collaborated in research on the factors affecting the educational outcomes of children in care. The research combines qualitative elements and, uniquely, a full retrospective cohort study of every child in England eligible to take GCSEs in 2013 – a total of 642,805. The cohort study combined data from the National Pupil Database (all children) and the national children's social care database (known as SSDA903 of children in need or in care).

The research identifies a number of factors that are associated with educational outcomes. Many of these factors applied to children who were not in care. There are two findings of general importance for local authorities in their role as corporate parents. First, the longer children had been in care, the better the outcomes – that is, the care system seems to provide an environment in which education outcome are improved, with shorter periods of care being associated with less good outcomes. Second, the population of children in need but not in care – that is, children supported by social care but remaining with their parents – on average achieved poorer educational outcomes than children in care.

The research aimed to provide information to policy-makers and practitioners that will enable practice to be improved. ADCS, the Virtual School Headteachers' Network (VSHN), and the National Consortium for Examination Results (NCER) have come together to produce a policy response.

This briefing will be of interest to elected members and senior officers with responsibility for children's social care and education, equalities, and economic development.

Briefing in full

Two important academic research reports were published in late 2015: they assess a broad range of evidence on the educational outcomes of children in care for policy and practice implications for local authorities, and to a lesser extent for schools and for national government. The publications explicitly seek to inform discussion and to support action that will improve educational outcomes.

'What is the relationship between being in care and the educational outcomes of children? An international systematic review', a literature review carried out by researchers at the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education at the University of Oxford; and

'The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England – Final Report', a detailed retrospective cohort study carried out by researchers at the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education at the University of Oxford and the University of Bristol. This research was funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

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The introduction to the research states “*In undertaking the most comprehensive study of its type in the UK, we now know more about how we can approach schools and services for looked after children to benefit their schooling and educational outcomes. We hope that this information is used to best effect.*”

‘What is the relationship between being in care and the educational outcomes of children?’

This study is a literature review of international research in certain English-speaking nations (England, USA, Australia, and Canada). Only fostering and kinship care were considered, not residential or other forms of care. Some research was very small-scale, and only four UK studies were considered. However the research included two large scale meta-analyses.

Key findings

There is a large attainment gap between children in care and their peers which reduces very substantially when other factors are accounted for. In England, the attainment gap between children in care and children not in care widens as children get older.

A number of factors were identified that affect educational achievement but are not to do with care. When these factors are taken into account, the achievement gap between children in care and those not in care reduced very substantially. These factors are:

- gender
- ethnicity
- educational aspirations (USA study)
- additional needs
- birth parents’ socioeconomic profile
- racial inequalities (USA study)
- education in lower-achieving schools
- prior factors, which includes:
 - poverty
 - prior maltreatment (abuse and neglect)
 - multiple ‘birth risks’ (ie developmental damage between conception and age two)
 - high risk families, which includes:
 - teen / single parents
 - substance misuse
 - poor parental mental health
 - poor parental levels of education
 - unemployment

Since the literature reviewed did not deal with a number of specific issues, there were no assessments or evaluations of the effects of:

- placement instability
- foster carer characteristics (such as education, and income)
- educational performance on entry to care
- educational progress over time

Conclusions from the literature review

“The review finds limited evidence that being in foster care is to blame for the poor educational outcomes of children.”

‘Instrumental variables’ (a statistical technique) could in principle be used to identify other factors and the relationship between factors, however the data available to the studies are insufficient for this purpose.

There needs to be better longitudinal multi-factorial large-scale research which includes the effects of early experiences (including ‘birth risks’) on later wellbeing.

‘The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England – Final Report’

This research addressed some of the conclusions in the literature survey through a large-scale retrospective cohort study based on all the 642,805 children in England eligible to take GCSEs in 2013. This cohort study was undertaken alongside interviews of children in care and people these children had identified as having an effect on their education.

The research had two explicit aims that have direct implications for local authorities:

- *“identify where to invest resources in order to maximise improved [educational] outcomes”;*
- *“identify ... the kind of practices that seem most likely to enhance educational outcomes”.*

The qualitative evidence was drawn from interviews with 26 young people in care or who had been in care, and adults identified by young people as having had a significant impact on their education. The adults included 10 carers, 20 designated teachers, 17 social workers, and six virtual school heads. The report focused on GCSE examination outcomes at age 16.

The quantitative evidence was drawn from a retrospective cohort study using the National Pupil Database and the SSDA903 social care database. The cohort studied comprised all children who were eligible to take GCSEs in 2013. The data from the two databases was matched.

Significant differences were found between different groups of children. In this paper, the following abbreviations are used:

Group	Description	Number	Percentage
AC	All children	642,805	100.0%
CNIN	Children not in care or in need on 31 March 2013	622,970	96.9%
CIN	Children in need on 31 March 2013	13,599	2.1%
CIC-ST	Children in care on 31 March 2013 and in care for less than one year	1,387	0.2%
CIC-LT	Children in care on 31 March 2013 and in care for more than one year	4,849	0.8%

The CIC population is further analysed into two groups: ‘**early entry to care**’ (EE) – before the age of 11 – and ‘**late entry to care**’ (LE) – after the age of 11.

The term ‘the attainment gap’ is used to describe the aggregate difference in attainment between CNIN and CIC or CIN.

Key findings

Overall comparisons

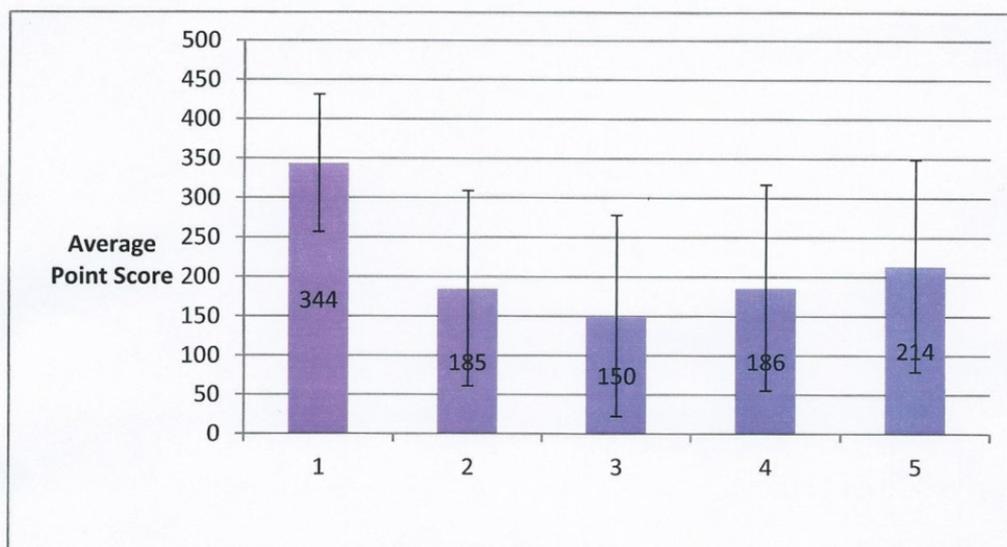
1. At all ages, the order of educational achievement is as follows:

1.	(best)	Children not in care or need – CNIN
2.		Children in care – long term – CIC-LT
3.		Children in need – CIN
4.	(worst)	Children in care – short term – CIC-ST

In quantitative terms, the Key Stage 4 mean point score and standard deviation are as follows:

Group	ID no. in chart below	Mean KS4 points	Standard deviation	Number
CNIN	1	344	87	622,970
CIN	2	185	142	13,599
CIC-ST	3	150	128	1,387
CIC-LT-LE	4	186	131	2,265
CIC-LT-EE	5	214	135	2,584

Graphically:



Since CIC-ST have typically been CIN before being taken into care, the evidence is that being in care is more conducive to education than being in need.

2. When comparing the CIN, CIC-ST and CIC-LT aggregate population with CNIN, there is greater poverty, incidence of SEND, poor attendance, more exclusions, and progressively poorer relative attainment over time (the attainment gap increases).

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3. Against the baseline of NCIN, at all ages:
 - the progress of CIC-LT-EE improved over time;
 - the progress of CIC-LT-LE worsened over time;
 - the progress of CIN worsened over time more than for CIC-LT-LE;
 - the progress of CIC-ST worsened over time more than for CIN
4. The overall widening of the attainment gap between CIC and CNIN increases gradually over time. This finding may relate to *“those entering into care in adolescence with more challenging difficulties being less likely to do well educationally”* or that some better-performing children leave the care system before adolescence, though further research is said to be needed on these points.

Findings related to individual characteristics

5. Deprivation measures (Free School Meal entitlement and IDACI) are more volatile for CIC than for CNIN, perhaps because caring arrangements change. Deprivation measures are a weaker predictor of GCSE outcomes for CIN and CIC than for CNIN.
6. SEND are far more common among CIC than CNIN, and are associated with large negative differences in outcome. The attainment gap is significantly reduced when allowance is made for SEND. The SEND categories most associated with poorer outcomes in CIC are: severe and profound learning difficulties, autistic spectrum disorder, moderate learning difficulties, and physical disabilities.
7. Other variables that are strongly predictive of poor GCSE outcomes for CIC are being male, and a high Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ - a standardised assessment tool) score.
8. Every single CIC interviewed stated that care had been a positive factor in their educational outcomes.

Findings related to the influence of care placements

9. Care generally provides a protective factor, with *“early admission to care being associated with consistently better outcomes”*, and that later admission to care may benefit from the protective factor of care but that it does not fully reverse damage already done. There was an *“overwhelming view from the interviews that entry to care had been beneficial educationally.”*
10. The general finding is that the earlier the child enters care, the better their progress. However, there are exceptions, where children experience many short care periods, and/or many changes of care setting, and/or many school changes.
11. Most children who entered care after the age of 10 achieved better educational outcomes when in care for longer. However, entry to care between 0 and 5 for children who were still in care by age 16 did not lead to improved outcomes.
12. CIC whose placement at age 16 was foster or kinship care achieved better than in other types of placement. To an extent this reflected the fact that the placement at age 16 tended to be longer and more stable.

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Findings related to schooling

13. The 60% of CIC attending a mainstream school did much better than children in alternative provision or special schools.
14. Absences and exclusions, and in particular unauthorised absences, are a substantial factor linked to the poorer outcomes of CIC.
15. Educational placement moves are more strongly linked to poor outcomes for CIN and CIC-ST than for CIC-LT.
16. Schools tend to perform similarly better or worse for children in all three groups – NCIN, CIN, and CIC. That is, there is no clear evidence that attending a particular school is advantageous for CIN or CIC.
17. There is no evidence that CIC or CIN attend schools that are associated with poor outcomes for NCIN.
18. In the interviews, CIC reported that teachers and school pastoral support staff, not foster carers, were the main determinants of educational progress. It was important that someone in the school cared for them and took an interest.
19. Most CIC reported that they enjoyed and benefitted from the one-to-one tuition identified through the PEP and funded through the Pupil Premium.

Other factors

20. The continued educational support of birth families was seen as important by many CIC. Conversely, birth family problems, where they continued without support, caused CIC, particularly in adolescence, stress and difficulty, and this evidenced itself by reduced levels of educational progress.
21. CIC identified the importance of 'someone who cared', and of feeling that their lives mattered to other people. When people showed that they genuinely cared this enabled CIC to make better progress.
22. Generally, resources in foster placements and schools do not emerge as a key factor in educational outcomes.
23. CIC recognised that they were responsible for their own learning, though they understood the importance of carers and professionals in providing support. The evidence suggested that CIC did better when they were emotionally ready to accept support.
24. Local authorities were not observed to have a direct differential impact on the educational outcomes of CIC. However, this may be because such factors impact at the school or individual level.

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Linking key factors to educational outcomes

A sophisticated regression model was used to identify factors that were correlated with poorer educational outcomes. Five sets of factors were examined, with each factor potentially being linked to educational outcomes. Some factors that were checked had a **significant correlation** with educational outcomes while for others the [correlation was not significant]:

Early environment:	Disability [Free School Meals at Key Stage 1] [Home language at Key Stage 1] [IDACI deprivation score at Key Stage 1] [Carer career type]
Individual characteristics:	Gender (male) Mean SDQ score (higher) SEN (ASD, MLD, SMLD) [Ethnicity]
Care placements:	Number of changes since Key Stage 2 Home language at Key Stage 4 (not English) Length of latest placement (positive effect) Free School Meals at Key Stage 4 In non-foster placement at Key Stage 4 [Length of time in care] [Placed out of local authority at Key Stage 4] [IDACI deprivation score at Key Stage 4]
Schooling:	Change in Year 10-11 In special school, PRU or alternative provision at Key Stage 4 Unauthorised absences Fixed-term exclusions (days missed) [Permanent exclusions]

Research conclusions

1. Children in need provide an additional, and perhaps more suitable, comparison group for children in care
2. A focus on educational progress gives a more realistic picture of the education and care system
3. Some CIC, particularly late entrants to care, will take longer to fulfil their educational potential than other children.
4. The public accountability frameworks should take account of the small variation between local authorities, having taken into account child and school differences, and should focus more on the characteristics of cohort of children in care in the local authorities.
5. Local authorities should place pupils in higher performing schools, and limit care placement and school changes particularly at Key Stage 4.

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6. Birth parents continue to have a strong influence on young people in care, including young people who have been in care for many years. Birth parents who continue to experience problems can destabilise the learning of young people in care.
7. Children in care with social, emotional and health difficulties need to be effectively supported in school both to avoid exclusion and to promote learning.
8. Foster carers should be supported to enable them to care effectively for vulnerable young people showing challenging behaviour, so as to increase placement stability.
9. Young people in care should be involved more fully in their education.
10. Strategies for educational improvement need to be addressed across the workforce in (non-foster and non-kinship) residential settings.
11. Kinship carers need support to address financial pressures which might affect schooling.

Comment

This is powerful research in that it is based on the full cohort, not a small sample. This enabled the researchers to identify correlations that would not otherwise have been revealed. Since the quantitative research considered every child in the cohort, including those not in care or in need, and those in care, it was possible to identify factors that were generally associated with poorer educational outcomes across the whole population.

Everyone working with or responsible for children's social care should consider this research and the implications for local and national policy and practice.

There were three key findings:

1. when taking into account factors that were associated with poorer outcomes across the whole population, and which were often over-represented among children in care, the headline lower scores for children in care were significantly better than might have been expected.
2. the longer children are in care, particularly stable foster care, in the period leading up to GCSEs, the better their outcomes.
3. the 2% of children in need typically achieve less well than the 1% of children in care.

Beyond the key findings, the factors that were correlated, or were not correlated, with educational outcomes might be surprising. While further work might be needed to determine whether the relationships are causal, there could be a direct impact on policy and practice. So, for example, the fact that there is no correlation between educational outcomes and being placed out of the local authority area at Key Stage 4 might inform placement policy. Similarly, the fact that there is a significant relationship between educational outcomes and days lost through fixed term exclusions should influence schools and virtual school heads to work to minimise such exclusions. While the impact of some of the factors might be seen as obvious, the fact that there is now full cohort analysis of their significance will enable a shift in practice from the anecdotal to the evidence-driven.

ADCS, the Virtual School Heads Network and the National Consortium for Examination Results have produced a policy response that makes a number of recommendations to the DfE, Ofsted, local authorities and schools. The main recommendations are that:

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- measures for educational progress should be used for children in care, alongside headline outcomes, and that support actions should focus on enabling children in care to make accelerated progress, taking into account their often-poor starting points.
- judgments about local authorities and school performance should not relate to a single year, as the cohort of children in care is so variable.
- a national analytical tool should be developed for local authorities to identify where support and challenge will be best targeted, based on the research evidence.

Two other documents have been produced relevant to the educational achievement of children in care.

The National Institute of Health and Social Care Excellence (NICE) have guidelines for local authorities and schools on 'attachment' which applies to all children with attachment and relationship difficulties, and particularly children in care who have disproportionate problems in this respect.

Clare Cameron, Graham Connelly and Sonia Jackson have written '*Educating Children and Young People in Care – Learning Placements and Caring Schools*'. This book, as the title suggests, promotes effective school practice in providing personal support to pupils in the care system in order to support their learning, and to avoid behaviour difficulties which might in turn lead to exclusions and school moves, with their negative effects on outcomes.

External links

The Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, University of Oxford [*What is the relationship between being in care and the educational outcomes of children? An international systematic review*](#) Aoife O'Higgins, Judy Sebba and Nikki Luke (September 2015)

The Rees Centre, University of Oxford and University of Bristol [*The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England – Final Report*](#) (November 2015)

Joint ADCS / VHSN / NCER Policy Paper [*The Educational Achievement of Children on Care*](#) (December 2015)

NICE [*Children's attachment: attachment in children and young people who are adopted from care, in care or at high risk of going into care*](#) (November 2015)

Educating Children and Young People in Care – Learning Placements and Caring Schools
Clare Cameron, Graham Connelly and Sonia Jackson (2015, Jessica Kingsley Publishers)

John Freeman [*Improving Educational Outcomes for Children in Care - Research implications for local authorities*](#) (December 2015)

Related briefings

[Care leavers' transitions to adulthood – NAO](#) (July 2015)

[Children's services: update on DfE Improvement Notices and Directions](#) (December 2015)

For further information, please visit www.lgiu.org.uk or email john.fowler@lgiu.org.uk