
THE ACHIEVEMENT AT KEY STAGE FOUR OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN PUBLIC CARE

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Introduction

A variety of reports from government agencies, voluntary agencies, researchers and the young people themselves have established that the education of young people in the public care is a cause for concern. There is a remarkable degree of consensus as to not only the difficulties but also the solutions. Following a range of developmental work on policy and systems, attention has now focused on the outcomes of statutory schooling for these young people – in particular, their attainment at key stage 4. Data show that the average performance of young people in care is significantly lower than national averages for the age cohort and that a disproportionate number of young people are not entered for GCSE or GNVQ at key stage 4 (47 per cent of total care leavers, compared with 3.6 per cent of boys and 3.1 per cent of girls nationally).

In order to explore in greater depth the end of key stage 4 performance of the cohort of pupils who were in the public care in summer 2001, the Department of Health and the Department of Education and Skills, together with the Local Government Association, jointly sponsored the National Foundation for Educational Research to undertake a research project.

Key Findings

- despite working with authorities with relatively advanced data collection methodologies and a good track record in their commitment to the education of young people in care, data sets for the cohort under study were frail, partial and different sources sometimes gave conflicting information
- there was evidence that not all placements were appropriate for the young people and, moreover, that some key stage 4 placements either denied the young people the opportunity of more than a few GCSEs or did not offer any GCSE entry
- unmet or misunderstood special educational needs could result in the breakdown of care placements
- young people with the highest number of changes of education placement at key stages 3 and 3 were most likely to be in the quarter of the sample not to be entered for any GCSE; data about the GCSE entry for a further third of the sample were missing
- school factors leading to positive outcomes for young people in care at key stage 4 included stable tutoring, mechanisms for the identification of individuals' needs and progress, and a rich range of formal and informal support - all routinely available and readily accessible to the young person
- stability of care placement was associated with higher performance at key stage 4
- there was evidence that concerns about post-16 living arrangements could distract young people from study in year 11
- it was not clear that there was sufficient early intervention to help young people rechannel their energies and develop attitudes and behaviour more conducive to positive educational outcomes at key stage 4
- both motivated and disaffected young people were perspicacious about the strengths and weaknesses of their educational placements; this suggests that the young people themselves are a significant resource as regards enhancing their own educational careers

Methodology

The research was conducted in two phases.

Phase 1 involved collecting data about the relevant population from twelve local education authorities in England known to have relatively sophisticated procedures for collecting and tracking data on their in-care population. These local authorities were sent a pro forma to complete for each young person who was in the care of their authority during June 2001 and in year 11 in the academic year 2000-2001. Those authorities with the smaller number of pupils in the relevant cohort were asked to complete a pro forma for the total cohort; those with larger numbers of young people were offered the option of completing pro formas for a sample. The potential sample was approximately 600; pro formas were returned for 377 young people (62 per cent of the total cohort). A range of local authority staff were involved in the completion of the pro forma and the processes by which they collected the data varied from authority to authority, depending on record-keeping systems and the location of available data.

Phase 2 involved case studies of young people identified on the basis of data from phase 1. A long list of potential case studies was drawn up, representing identified categories related to progress and attainment (eg 'average' attainment; good key stage 3 attainment and poor key stage 4 attainment and vice versa; poor attainment throughout key stages 3 and 4), identified special educational need (eg learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural difficulties), established groups of care users (eg young mothers, asylum seekers) and post-16 plans. Efforts were made to contact an original group of eleven young people but a total of nearly 30 young people were eventually contacted as replacements were sought for those who were unwilling to participate, no longer available or uncontactable. Case studies of seven young people were finally completed. Interviews were conducted with the young person and his/her carer, social worker and school contact(s) relevant to year 11.

More detailed findings

It should be pointed out that some of the quantitative data should be treated with caution as many of the pro forma were returned with partial data only.

educational placements

- the majority (two-thirds) of the sample had had only one or two educational placements during their secondary phase schooling while they were in care; nearly a third had had three or more different placements;
- nearly half the placements were in mainstream schools; a fifth were in special schools or alternative provision
- it was not clear that all placements were to the benefit of the young people — rather than the adults seeking solutions for them; decisions did not always involve all the relevant people (including the young people themselves)
- analysis of pupils' different levels of engagement in different aspects of education was inadequate
- positive school factors included: stable tutoring, mechanisms for the identification of individuals' needs and progress, and a rich range of formal and informal support — all routinely available

special and additional educational needs

- one-third of the cohort were reported to have a statement and two-thirds to have no identified special needs
- misunderstanding of special educational needs exacerbated educational difficulties, increased 'failure' and resulted in damaging 'labelling' of the young person
- additional needs (eg for language support) were not always met effectively on account of lack of clarity regarding sources of support and resources
- post-16 choices were not sufficiently informed by existing data about special and additional educational needs
- support was often not adequately evaluated

key stage attainment

- hardly any data were available for the cohort's performance at key stages 1 and 2; key stage 3 data were available for only half the sample
- nearly one-third of the sample were entered for five or more subjects at GCSE; one-quarter of the sample were not entered for any subject; data were missing for one-third of the sample
- less than ten per cent of the sample achieved five or more GCSE grades A*-C; one-third achieved five or more subjects at grades A-G; almost half achieved at least one grade A*-G
- young people with the highest number of changes of educational placement in key stages

- 3 and 4 were most likely not to be entered for any GCSE
- about half the sample followed the key stage 4 curriculum and examination courses in normal classes with their peers
- under one quarter of the sample were known to have achieved alternative accreditation

information

- information about educational careers was frail
- data were conflicting and contradictory accounts were given
- data were not regarded by many social workers as relevant to their work with the young people

post-16 careers

- two-fifths of the sample were in further education or a school sixth form in the October following the end of key stage 4; approximately one-fifth were in a training placement or employment; one-fifth were in neither employment nor training
- the young persons' career aspirations/plans were unknown to the respondent or missing in almost two-thirds of cases
- at the end of August 2001, two-thirds of the sample were still looked-after, with under half continuing in the same care placement as in July 2001
- there was little evidence of programmes of support to accompany young people's education/training plans

attitudes

- some young people had developed attitudes and/or behaviour which were incompatible with learning in school; it was not clear that there had been adequate intervention to help the young people rechannel their energies and develop more positive attitudes and behaviour
- both motivated and disaffected young people were perspicacious about the strengths and weaknesses of their educational placements

care placements and carers

- a third of the sample had been in one care placement from age 11 to age 16 or during their time in care during this period; one-third had two or three care placements and one-quarter had six or more placements (max 21) during this period

- data suggested that stability of care placement was associated with higher performance at key stage 4
- carers referred to systemic deficiencies and poor corporate parenting by way of poor information, lack of resources and failure in communication channels

Copies of the full report (RR434) and the accompanying toolkit for local authorities are available in a folder pack (reference EPIA) by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Copies of this Research Brief (RB434) are also available from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/>

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