

research in practice

Ruth Sinclair The education of children in need




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The education of children in need

A research overview by Ruth Sinclair

research in practice

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introduction

“I don’t always get my homework done due to pressure from home, then I get into trouble at school and it just makes everything worse and I sometimes get depressed.” [15 year old]

Schooling is a major part of any child’s life. What happens in school has an enormous influence on a child’s development and day to day experience. Any consideration of how to meet the needs of a child must include their education.

People in local authorities whose responsibilities lie primarily with social services may feel that their obligation is first and foremost to children looked after (there is certainly much to be achieved in respect of the education of these children and young people). Nevertheless, it is important to extend that focus and to consider other children, especially those in need within the education system. Elected members and staff may worry that for Social Services to take responsibility for these children is stretching both their remit and their resources too far; certainly the number of children who may be deemed to be *in need* is much greater than that of children who are looked after by the local authority. However, from the research reviewed in this paper, it is clear that Social Services departments do have an important role to play in addressing the needs of children who are experiencing difficulties at school.

children in need

The best place to begin to consider which children might be in need is the *Children Act 1989*, which uses this definition:

“ a child shall be taken to be in need if:

- a) he is unlikely to achieve or maintain, or to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision for him of services by a Local Authority under this Part;
- b) his health or development is likely to be significantly impaired, or further impaired, without the provision for him of such services; or
- c) he is disabled.”

(s.17(10) *Children Act 1989*)

The Act goes on, in section 17(11), to clarify what is meant by development:

“‘development’ means physical, intellectual, emotional, social or behavioural development.”

This is a very broad definition which social service departments have been left to translate into an operational concept with the result that there are many different local definitions of ‘children in need’. Indeed,

a recent survey of all local authorities produced 108 different criteria (Sinclair and Carr-Hill, 1997). An earlier evaluation of the implementation of this part of the *Children Act* identified 18 groups of children which the 60 responding authorities used to indicate the extent of need in their communities (Aldgate et al, 1994). Four related to education: children with special educational needs (SEN); children excluded from school; school truants; children resident in independent schools.

The study also indicated that many social services departments were finding it difficult to re-focus services away from crisis work towards preventive support with this broader group (Aldgate and Tunstill, 1996).

children in need and education

For the purposes of this paper it is helpful to use the *Children Act* definition to highlight three groups of children to whom social services and education departments together have a major responsibility. They are:

- 1 children looked after by the Local Authority
- 2 children with special educational needs (SEN)
- 3 children who are out of school.

Of course these groups are not mutually exclusive. Some children who are looked after are also out of school; some with special educational needs are excluded; some who have been excluded or are out of school will become looked after.

Children who are looked after by the local authority clearly fit within the *Children Act* definition of 'in need', and as 'corporate parents' local authorities have a duty to promote their education.

Children with SEN will include some, but not all, who are disabled— who are specifically defined as 'in need'. If these children are to overcome school problems, health services will also have to join the collaboration between social services and education. This group is also likely to include those who have been assessed as having emotional and behaviour difficulties (EBD), but who are unlikely to be disabled as defined by the *Children Act*. In terms of categorisation, therefore, there is a complex relationship between children in need, children with SEN and those with EBD or challenging behaviours.

What of the third group, *Children who are out of school*? Do we define this group as in need and, if so, what are the responsibilities of education and social services departments in helping them succeed in school?

The definition of 'in need' provided by the *Children Act* includes a child whose intellectual development is 'significantly impaired or further impaired'. Certainly it would seem that children out of school for any length of time will fit this definition.

Since the implementation of the *Children Act* non-school attendance is no longer—of itself—grounds for a Care Order, but, interestingly, in a recent case upheld in the High Court, a magistrate found that a 15 year-old girl had 'suffered such an impairment of educational, social and intellectual development as to warrant a Care Order being made'. (Robertson, 1996; quoted in Reid, 1997).

Two other factors point to the need for joint intervention by social services and education departments when children are out of school and for staff in each agency to understand the role that the other can play. First, although problems may be manifested in school, they often originate elsewhere, especially in the family. Second, what so often follows when children are out of school—increased involvement in criminal activity; increased probability of family breakdown; deteriorating mental health—will ultimately involve input from Social Service departments. Earlier intervention may be a more effective use of resources.

“Once you get kicked out, you get bored - you get up at 10.00am, argue with your mum, and then leave the house. You look for something to do - if that’s a car chase, or drugs or petty crime, you do it.”

[Young person excluded from school]

This overview is concerned mainly with the first and third groups starting with children looked after by the local authority.

the education of children looked after by local authorities

“The educational difficulties that children bring with them to care may be compounded by their experience of it, with crippling effects on their lives after leaving care. Care authorities should act to remedy the educational disadvantage of children in their care and do all that a good parent would do to ensure that children’s educational needs are met.” (Utting Report, 1991)

The education of children looked after has been moving steadily up the policy agenda in recent years and is now well understood as a key aspect of the parental responsibilities held by local authorities. Although the weaknesses in the system are longstanding, serious interest in tackling them is a reasonably recent phenomenon. Research studies continue to show that there is much room for improvement in both policy and practice. More hopefully they also point to useful ways forward.

One of the first serious attempts to document knowledge about the education of children in care was undertaken by Sonia Jackson in the mid-1980’s (Jackson, 1987). In reviewing the literature she found a yawning gap. There were many books and articles on topics such as assessment or foster care, but very little specifically on education, reflecting the low priority given to it by policy makers, practitioners and carers, and indeed researchers.

Moreover there was evidence that many social services departments either trivialised education or saw it only as a problem. For instance, when considering placement choices, information on education was often listed together with ‘activities and hobbies’. The overall tone was negative, with a focus on difficulties in pupils’ attendance or behaviour. Very little was said about the centrality of education in children’s fu-

tures and in enhancing their life chances. There was little to encourage staff to work with young people to promote a sense of achievement. Indeed, as Jackson observed, prospective adopters or foster carers were given written advice against having educational expectations that were too high.

A lack of encouragement was also noted in a more recent national survey of social service departments. The results led the National Foundation of Education Research to conclude that “positive efforts at enrichment of educational experience were rare” (Fletcher-Campbell and Hall, 1990). The low priority given by social work staff to the schooling of children in care is demonstrated by a failure to keep systematic records of their educational achievement. Researchers have consistently reported the dearth of information on examinations and qualifications in case files (Parker et al, 1991; Sinclair et al, 1995; Berridge et al, 1997). Nor is such information required by central government, even at the point when young people leaves the care system.

From her review of the literature Sonia Jackson identifies five pathways to educational failure:

- pre-care experience
- broken schooling
- low expectations
- low self-esteem
- lack of continuity of caregiver.

This analysis offers a useful set of headings for reviewing recent research findings and also suggests the areas of policy and practice where change needs to occur if pathways to failure are to be turned into avenues to success.

pre-care experience

‘Before I came into a foster home I was very mixed up and confused.’

‘Well before we were fostered I never had time for homework because I had things to do around the house.’

The family situation and experiences of children before they come into public care can result in underachievement at school. The great majority who are looked after come from disadvantaged homes, a circumstance associated with reduced social and cognitive development. In addition, many will have suffered trauma and neglect, which makes education difficult (St Claire and Osborn, 1987). In reviewing the research on children in care, the Department of Health conclude that ‘...just being in care is not usually in itself a primary cause of educational failure. It is rather that children bring their educational problems into care with them...’ (DH, 1991).

This view is supported by a longitudinal study of children in foster care, comparing their educational progress with a comparison group of children receiving help from Social Services while living at home (Heath

et al, 1989). Both groups were significantly below the national average in educational tests, despite the much more favourable home circumstances of the foster children. Furthermore, children who came into care because of abuse or neglect scored significantly lower than others. The researchers concluded that ‘even long-term and settled placements did not seem to have overcome the educational disadvantage of early child abuse or neglect’ (Heath et al, 1994).

It is clear that children looked after need even more encouragement than others: they need additional help and support to compensate for earlier deprivation and distress.

broken schooling

“I wish I had stayed at the same school because every children’s home I went to changed school.”

For many young people, time spent in public care means a great many changes of placement (Rowe et al, 1989; Bullock et al, 1993). Too often a change of placement also means a change of school—this was the main reason for change of school in the NFER study (Fletcher-Campbell and Hall, 1990). A follow-up study of adolescents in contact with social services departments in London found that over 80% had experienced a change of school during a one-year period, and 15% had experienced four or more changes (Sinclair et al, 1995). In a similar study in Scotland almost three-fifths of the school-age children changed school, either at admission to the care system or within the first 12 months: 1 in 10 changed school three or more times within the year (Kendrick, 1995).

The damage caused by frequent changes of school is well documented but this understanding remains to be translated into standard practice so that schooling is always taken into account when placement decisions are made.

low expectations

“Everyone, including teachers, treats you like you are an idiot because you are in care.”

“Before I went into care I was in top sets and everything. They put me in bottom sets as soon as I moved into care and moved schools.”

Personal accounts by young people who have experience of care consistently highlight the low expectations of teachers. There is also evidence over many years of the limited importance that social workers attach to educational matters—which contrasts sharply with parents’ concerns (Jackson, 1987; Sinclair et al, 1995; Triseliotis et al, 1995). However, an Oxford study of children in long-term foster care does not support the view that staff have low expectations. Rather, it suggests a divergence in the social workers’ and teachers’ expectations of educational progress, the former appearing over-optimistic—perhaps through a lack of detailed knowledge of the child’s school performance—while the latter are more realistic (Heath et al, 1994).

low self-esteem

“In school people laugh at me and pick on me because I am in care. Some parents tell their children not to hang around with me because of where I live. This stops me concentrating.”

“School is the only thing that keeps me going. It is strange really, because although I have been in many awkward predicaments I have not let my education slip. The staff and foster parents have helped me.”

Building a young person’s confidence and self-esteem is the key to enabling them to become self-reliant, responsible adults. Educational achievement is an important factor in developing this confidence and self-esteem. But school experiences also have the potential to destroy or undermine those with a fragile self-image: lack of interest soon turns to a lack of motivation. Many personal accounts and surveys of young people in care portray the enormous damage done by the attitudes of staff and the ethos exhibited by schools. Some demonstrate that having a champion can provide that spark of determination that enables young people to fight back (McVeigh, 1982; Who Cares? Trust, 1993; Fever, 1994; Berridge et al, 1997).

lack of continuity

“I’m not at school at the moment...I don’t fit into normal comprehensive...there is no help or encouragement to go back to school.”

“When I was first put in care I went into a children’s home. I had no interest in school - I felt fat, ugly, and unloved. Then I met a black residential worker... she put me back on the right track, then she found me a foster mum who helped me immensely. Now I have rekindled my passion for education and I am doing really well.”

Many who have been in public care experience a lack of continuity. There is no individual in their lives on whom they can rely to take a consistent interest in their welfare or to fight on their behalf. Many receive very little support from their families; their social workers are pressed for time; there is a rapid turnover in care staff—all this means there is no-one to take a broad interest in their schooling.

The importance of continuity is supported by research findings that link improved educational attainment to the creation of stability for children through planned long-term placements in foster care (Aldgate et al, 1994). The influence of stable placements is also demonstrated by studies of care leavers—for instance, in Garnett’s study, the formal qualifications of children with stable care careers were significantly greater than those who entered care as teenagers or who had unstable care careers (Garnett, 1992).

Where a young person lacks a close or significant adult, mentoring schemes can help provide educational support that in turn helps build confidence and growth in self-esteem. One pilot project which has proved successful is the *Book of My Own* by the Who Cares? Trust. This

book-buying and supported reading scheme links adult supports to young people in care to help them choose and buy books for themselves which are then read together (Bald et al, 1995).

“It has made a bit of a difference because we have to read books quite regularly at school and we normally have to write about them.”

“I felt more confident.”

the impact of the *Children Act 1989*

The *Children Act 1989* is generally considered a notable piece of legislation because of the extent to which it is based on research and prior evaluations of practice. Hence the Guidance that ‘responsible authorities should have regard to the importance of continuity of education and of taking a long-term view of a child’s education; providing education opportunity and support; and promoting educational achievement’ (DH, 1991 Vol 4 para 2.33). The *Children Act* requires that every child looked after shall have a written care plan and that this should set out the child’s educational needs and how they are to be met.

Subsequent research on the implementation of this part of the Act shows evidence of increased consideration of educational matters in planning for children looked after: in a major post-Act study of core planning about two thirds of the cases included decisions on education. However, the focus of these educational plans tends to be very narrow, often not more than the name of the school to be attended and little on ways to promote educational achievement (Grimshaw and Sinclair, 1997). The study also points to the lack of partnership between Social Service and Education departments, a point made forcefully in a joint inspection by the Social Services Inspectorate and the Office for Standards in Education undertaken in 1994 (DH/OFSTED, 1995). As an assessment of the education of children looked after since the *Children Act*, this report makes depressing reading. And there is continuing evidence of resistance to change. When Ofsted reported on a later inspection in 1996, it could only conclude that its earlier recommendations for closer liaison between schools, LEAs and SSDs in order to develop a strategy to support the education of children looked after were ‘no closer to being addressed’ (OFSTED, 1996).

Children’s Services Plans have a pivotal role to play here. The regulations require agencies to work together. This therefore provides a forum for health, education and social care agencies to plan a coherent service that makes clear the contributions each can make to improving educational outcomes.

summary of the findings of the Joint SSI/OFSTED inspection of the education of children looked after by local authorities

- education standards achieved were too low: the majority of children did not reach standards commensurate with their ability
- over 25% of 14-16 year-olds were poor attenders or were excluded
- educational progress and standards were given too low a priority by social workers, teachers and carers
- unsatisfactory co-ordination and planning for individual children, as staff from the two departments did not understand each other's roles and functions
- liaison between social workers, teachers and carers was patchy
- the responsibilities of different staff and agencies was ill-understood, leading to a lack of concerted action
- drift and delay in placement decisions damaged educational progress
- lack of awareness of the changed balance in the responsibilities of schools and the LEA's reduced the possibilities for effective liaison
- widespread lack of training for social workers and carers in meeting the educational needs of children

Source: DH/OFSTED, 1995: The Education of children who are looked after by Local Authorities

the consequences

"Well it (care) didn't do much for me schoolwork for a start because...I was always moving...I'd have to take a lot of time off school and I ...ended up not taking any exams through it all."

The consequences of these very poor standards are clearly demonstrated, in the pervading sense of wasted opportunity and unfulfilled potential, and, concretely, in the lack of educational qualifications.

In Garnett's study of care leavers, over 75% had no qualifications at all (Garnett, 1992). A more recent study reported the same story: ²/₃ of care leavers had no qualifications and only 15% had a GCSE (A-C) grade or equivalent. This compares with the figure of 38% of 15-17 year-olds in the general population who gain five or more good GCSE's (Biehal et al, 1995). This pattern of underachievement is longstanding. The National Child Development (NCD) study cohort of 17,000 children born in 1958 found that 43% of care leavers had no qualifications, compared with a figure of 16% for matched non-care school leavers (Cheung and Heath). The lower level of achievement could not be attributed only to social care conditions such as poverty and appeared to have a direct connection with the care experience.

Lack of qualifications tends to lead to insecure career paths: research shows that around 40% of care leavers are likely to be without either

education, training or employment. Even more worryingly, this figure tends to rise in the first year after leaving care (Garnett, 1992; Sinclair et al, 1995; Biehal et al, 1995). Again, the finding is reinforced by the NCD study which found that the care leavers were more likely to be unemployed and to have lower status occupations than their lack of qualifications would indicate. These impediments continue over time.

the successes

"I was lucky to be at a school that only had good experiences of young people from care; this meant they were not judgmental. They also assumed that I would not fail and that I had the same chances as any other young person - from my experience, an attitude rare amongst schools."

"The staff at my home and the teachers at school have really encouraged and helped me with coping with my problems and my school work. Staff in the unit pushed us into going to school."

Of course it is not all bad: some young people do go on to succeed, even if it is often despite rather than because of the system. Sonia Jackson has studied some of the successes, identified first as those who have achieved 5 or more GCSEs and, from among them, a group who gained university degrees. The path to their success was rarely straightforward, with many dropping out for a time but coming back to education at a later date. The background and care careers of the group seemed to follow a pattern similar to that of looked after children as a whole, but some factors seemed to stand out. All had a role-model or mentor to support them and fight the system on their behalf, and a high proportion were enthusiastic and early readers (Jackson, forthcoming). An earlier study by the same author (Jackson, 1987) found consistent evidence that children who were not reading by the age of eight were likely to have significantly greater difficulty educationally and otherwise throughout their childhood and beyond. As this is written, there are no national targets for children and family social care services, although it is likely that something of the sort will soon be set. A number of authorities are already using their own. The ability to read by the age of eight might be one target; increasing the percentage of care leavers who go on to further education might be another.

the education of children out of school

Children who are out of school are a second key group in need within the education system to whom Social Service departments also have a major responsibility.

Children may be out of school in a variety of ways:

- formally excluded
- unofficially excluded
- truanting
- children who stay away from school knowing they are likely to be excluded if they return

- persistent non-attenders
- children suffering long-term illness.

Social services and education departments have a part to play in helping to keep all these children in school. This overview focuses on those excluded, formally or informally.

the numbers out of school

The *Education Act 1993* defined the term ‘exclusion’—previously understood as suspension or expulsion. Under the Act, exclusions may be either permanent or fixed-term; indefinite exclusion is no longer permissible and fixed-term exclusions cannot exceed more than 14 days in any school year.

The Department for Education also issued a Code of Practice providing guidance on procedures for exclusion. This Guidance was part of a ‘six-pack’ of Government Circulars relating to ‘Pupils with Problems’ (DFE, 1994). Interestingly, while three of the Circulars were issued jointly with the Department of Health—implying joint Education and Social Service responsibility—this was not the case with the Circular on Exclusions from Schools. This may help to explain why the Code of Practice does not give a young person the right to put their point of view or to be present at an exclusion hearing, unlike the provisions of the *Children Act*, and contrary to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Of course, many good schools will offer young people that opportunity, but to have included such a right in the Code would have enhanced the standards of less good schools (Sinclair, 1996).

Children have always been excluded from school. It is the rapid increase in exclusions over recent years that is causing such concern, coupled with the fact that it is happening to children at younger and younger ages (Brodie, 1995; forthcoming 1998). Accurate figures at a national level have not been readily available until recently; the figures below represent estimates together with DfEE statistics for England.

Estimates of numbers of permanent exclusions September 1990 - July 1996

Year	All permanent exclusions	Primary only
1990-1	2,910	378
1991-2	3,833	537
1992-3	7,000-8,000	-
1994-5	11,084	1,365
1995-6	12,476	1,608

Source: Hayden, 1997; DfEE 1997

These figures are for permanent exclusions only. Many other children will experience fixed-term exclusions on more than one occasion. (Hayden, 1997; OFSTED, 1996).

In addition, many children are unofficially excluded or simply drift out of the system. Inevitably it is harder to put an accurate figure on the total numbers affected at a national level: one study estimates it to be

many more than those officially excluded (Stirling, 1992). Other research studies of vulnerable adolescents report the very high proportions who are out of school and frequently not enrolled in any form of schooling. As an example, one study of 75 adolescents assessed by a Social Service department in London found that 20% were not enrolled in **any** school at all, and that for many this situation had pertained for many many months, even years. Add to this the 16% who were only receiving very limited part-time education, those youngsters who were poor attenders and those excluded, and the scale of non school-attendance becomes extremely worrying (Sinclair et al, 1995).

who is excluded

Analysis of those excluded shows that some groups of children are more likely to be excluded than others. They are:

- older pupils
- boys
- African/Caribbean pupils
- children with Special Educational Needs
- children looked after by the local authority.

older pupils

The vast majority of exclusions, well over 80%, are of secondary school pupils. The most common age for exclusion is 14, with almost 70% of exclusions relating to children aged 13 to 15.

boys

Most excluded pupils are boys. A range of studies suggests the ratio of boys to girls is between four or five to one.

African/ Caribbean pupils

There has been evidence over several years to indicate that black pupils and black boys in particular are disproportionately excluded. This has now been confirmed by DfEE figures presented to Parliament (see Hansard 21 November, col 682). While black pupils make up 2.5% of the school population, they account for 10.4% of excluded pupils.

Pupils permanently excluded from school by ethnic group England and Wales 1994/95

Ethnic group population	as % of excluded pupils	as % of school
White	83.8	89.8
Black Caribbean	7.3	1.1
Black African	1.4	0.6
Black other	1.7	0.8
Indian	0.9	2.7
Pakistani	2.0	2.1
Bangladeshi	2.4	0.8
Chinese	0.1	0.4
Other ethnic group	2.3	1.5

Source: DFEE, November 1996

There is growing evidence to suggest that teachers' attitudes to black pupils differ from that to other pupils—as illustrated by this Deputy Head (CRE, 1997):

“Expectations make a big difference... We do tend, however well intentioned, to see a black boy and think they are going to be trouble.”

The Ofsted inspectors certainly found that the case histories of excluded black pupils stood out: although more likely to be of average or above average ability, they were assessed as underachieving; there were less likely to be long exclusion histories; their relationships with teachers were often poor (OFSTED, 1996).

pupils with special educational needs

Recent years have seen an increase in the number of pupils excluded from special schools as well as an increase in pupils with special needs excluded from mainstream schools (Stirling, 1994). In 1995/96 the rate of permanent exclusion for children with statements of SEN was seven times higher than for pupils without statements (DfEE, 1997). The problem is most marked where there are pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Several factors contribute: the increasing market-orientation of schools; reduced levels of support; the speedier process associated with exclusion compared to obtaining a Statement of Special Educational Need—and, of course, the resource commitment that may be incurred.

children looked after by the local authority

Not all local authorities would be able to identify which of their children are excluded from school but local studies indicate that in some residential establishments exclusion or absence from school is the norm (Stirling, 1992); others suggest this is less of a problem (Berridge et al, 1997). It has been estimated that a child in a Lothian residential unit is 80 times more likely to be excluded from school than one living at home (Maginnis, 1993). Nationally the Audit Commission estimate that at any one time 40% of young people in residential care are not attending school (Audit Commission, 1994).

why are children excluded?

A range of factors impact upon the number of children excluded:

- system-related factors
- school-based factors
- family circumstances
- individual characteristics.

System-related factors include the impact of the Local Management of Schools (LMS) and the increasingly competitive market, the repercussions from the publication of 'league tables' and the influence of the National Curriculum.

The influence of school-related factors is shown in the variation in

rates of exclusion, even in schools with similar intakes. Significant influences are the quality of management in the school, the ethos of the school and the successful application of school behaviour policies (Rutter et al, 1979; Elton Report, 1989; OFSTED, 1996).

While these factors are important, they are more appropriately within the province of the education department. It is in respect of the last two areas—family circumstances and individual problems—that social service departments and health agencies also have a role to play.

problems faced by the youngsters who had been excluded

In the OFSTED study, evidence was gathered on the family circumstances of the excluded children. The problems identified were clearly both structural and individual:

- poverty
- the need to look after sick or disabled parents
- loss of parent(s), through death or family breakdown
- strained family relationships
- absentee fathers
- involvement of older siblings in crime and drugs
- lack of parental control
- physical or sexual abuse
- racism

Source: OFSTED, 1996.

One could not disagree with their conclusion that ‘that information presented a grim catalogue of misery’. Nor can it be denied that children with such problems are ‘children in need’. The implication is that social services departments need to find ways of being more effectively involved with the issues surrounding exclusion. Many excluded children, especially the younger ones, are already known to social services departments: in a recent study of 65 children with permanent or multiple exclusions from primary school, over $\frac{3}{4}$ were already receiving help from the social services department (Hayden, 1997). Similarly, in detailing the cases of twelve primary school children, the researcher notes the depth of family and behavioural problems, and the lack of consistent preventive support—despite the involvement of many agencies (Parsons, 1997). This report has a rather chilling conclusion:

“The prospect of what these children might become, and what might happen to them without appropriate provision, is frightening.”

the outcomes for children who have been excluded

A number of studies point to the likelier consequences of exclusion for the wider community as well as for the young person concerned:

- increased likelihood of family breakdown

An increasing number of children who become looked after do so as adolescents: more young people come into public care at age 15 than any other age (DH statistics). For many of these young people, being out of school is a sig-

nificant contributing factor to this breakdown in relationships with their family (Berridge et al, 1997)

- the path to a career of insecure employment

The great majority (75%) of youngsters excluded from school fail to complete their schooling (Audit Commission, 1996). Furthermore, it has been estimated that excluded pupils receive under 10% of full-time education in the year in which they have been excluded (Parsons, 1997). They subsequently lack qualifications and therefore have limited employment opportunities, leading to long-term unemployment

- increased involvement in crime

Exclusion from school is known to be one of four identified 'risk' factors in the onset of juvenile offending (Graham and Bowling, 1995; Farrington, 1996). This is demonstrated in figures from the Audit Commission which show that of young people appearing before the courts nearly half (42%) have been excluded from school, and a further quarter (23%) are not attending (Audit Commission, 1996)

- the public cost

Estimates have been made of the cost of exclusions. These suggest that replacement education for excluded pupils costs twice as much as mainstream education—even though these pupils receive on average less than 10% of full-time schooling. This represents poor value for money. Other departments also incur costs, most noticeably the Police and Criminal Justice systems and Social Services, although it is not possible to say these are directly attributable to exclusion (Parsons, 1997).

addressing the issues: possible policy and practice solutions

This overview has highlighted many long-standing and well-documented concerns. Research studies have tended to identify problems; few have been designed to demonstrate 'what works'. The findings nevertheless make it easier to identify changes to aspects of policy and practice that may have a positive impact. This last section reports briefly on selected examples of developments in local authority practice.

making the education of children in need a priority issue

A consistent worry over the years has been the lack of priority given by social services and education departments to the education of the children for whom the authority has a corporate parenting responsibility. Attitudes have a tendency to become ingrained to a point where change for the better waits on the impetus of a new strategy and, in this case, on a strategy that can carry the support of more than one local authority department.

A number of authorities have demonstrated the importance of policy change by designating a senior officer with specific responsibility for educational matters; a few have moved towards creating specific posts. Development of this kind indicates commitment and permits the improvement of expertise. Perhaps more important, it has the potential to

create a champion—someone who will fight to bring about real and sustainable benefits.

In Hampshire and Manchester the problems have been tackled by setting up a support service staffed by teachers whose main task is to ensure that the education component of a child's care plan is given priority. In Hampshire these teachers provide practical support and advocacy, take responsibility for children in difficulty at school or whose education is in danger of being disrupted by placement change. They also provide social workers with education training. In addition, the support service has succeeded in forging a 'compact' agreement with Southampton Institute which has had the effect of very significantly increasing the chances of a looked after child entering further education.

Continuous improvement on national statistics for children looked after between 1995 and 1997 has been very marked. The county now quotes a figure of 14% who have gained GCSEs at Grades A to C against the national average of 2%, and of 60% against 12% for those entering further education. It also reports a dramatic reduction in the number of exclusions of looked after children—down 22% against an opposite general trend of 20%.

Giving education a high priority is not only about seeking to address the undoubted weaknesses in current practice: it is also about celebrating educational success, about publicly acknowledging that school matters. Hampshire's strategy has included printing a flyer about its service and making public announcements about its improved results.

multi-agency working

While this paper makes the case for much greater involvement by social services departments in the education of children in need, it is clear that it depends as much on good multi-agency working. Moreover, good working relations need to be established at several levels, for example across departments, among local schools and between social work staff. A wide range of initiatives is developing, with examples of the following activities:

- joint committees or sub-committees of social services and education departments—some with commissioning powers—which promote the development of joint policies and services
- joint management groups to plan at a strategic level
- joint working parties to prepare the Children's Services Plan, and with the potential to incorporate the local education department's Behaviour Support Plan within the Children's Service Plan
- joint officers panels, for instance to consider the needs and provision of services to children identified as at risk of exclusion or of placement in a residential establishment
- joint appointments or joint-funded services or individual posts such as behaviour support teams, a school counselling service or a team

to support children at risk of dropping out of the education system

- common budgets, for instance for ‘out of county’ residential placements or alternative measures to enable children to stay in the locality and avoid expensive residential placements
- agreed protocols, for instance on definitions of ‘children in need’ or criteria for assessment and review, such as “A Devon Approach to Children in Need”
- adjustments to transport budgets to make it easier for a child to stay in the same school following a change of placement
- local links between schools and area offices, with a designated social worker acting as link person to a named school or schools, or a designated teacher within a school acting as a link person for pupils who are looked after
- combined training activity to clarify the respective roles of each agency, their legislative frameworks, responsibilities, systems, policies, procedures
- user group involvement, for example by setting up ‘looked after’ education groups of high achieving care leavers who are willing to provide peer mentoring and staff training.

raising the awareness of staff

Another leitmotif in the research concerns the lack of knowledge and understanding among social services department staff of the educational system, and vice versa. Without this basic knowledge social care staff are hampered in their work with schools to gain the best for children and young people. It has long been known that children’s educational achievement is linked to the level of parental interest in their schooling. Where social services departments are undertaking that parental role it follows that a local authority must be able to represent and sustain the same high level of interest.

The experience in Durham and elsewhere is also demonstrating that working with staff in residential care, informing them about exclusion procedures and how they can get involved with the school on behalf of a child, has greatly reduced the number out of school. With a better understanding of the system, staff have been able to step in earlier and work in partnership with schools to reduce the sort of problems that lead to absence or exclusion. Guides are now available to help residential staff gain a better grasp of the school system and to inform teachers about children looked after (Sandiford, 1996).

This review has highlighted the damage caused to educational opportunities by changes in school and instability in placement. Although this is well known and understood, it is still not an automatic consideration in placement decisions: actions which raise awareness of educational issues seem a necessary catalyst in raising practice standards.

preventive work

Everything that has been said about children out of school –whether these are children looked after or children in need–points to the benefit of early intervention.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is funding a project at the National Children's Bureau to map preventive activity which has already identified examples of innovative work. They include:

- the development of mechanisms for joint case planning to offer support to children and families both at home and at school
- instituting active, co-operative links at a local level between schools and social service department offices that can allow trust to develop; in this way school staff are provided with a safe early route through which they can voice concerns
- social services departments, alone or with education departments, commissioning voluntary sector agencies to provide preventive services aimed at maintaining children in school: for example, the National Pyramid Trust; the East London Schools Fund; Cities in Schools
- engaging the wider community, including the business community, in supporting individuals who are experiencing problems, for instance through greater use of independent visitors and mentoring schemes. Such schemes can provide acceptable role models; they can instill a sense of achievement and reward success; they give young people a champion.

education plans for children looked after and in need

As well as broader policy and practice initiatives it is equally important that work with individual children should be of a high quality. The *Children Act* sets such standards in assessing the needs of children and families and planning ways to meet them. It is through good practice in care planning that the child's needs will be viewed holistically, and continuity in schooling and stability of placements can be achieved.

The *Children Act* stipulates that education must be included within the assessment and planning process. Tools such as the Assessment and Action Records have been promoted by the Department of Health as a way to ensure that all aspects of a child's life– including their education –are taken into account (DH, 1995). Care plans for children looked after must also include an education plan. As noted earlier, planning and review processes have improved since the *Children Act*, but educational matters can still get limited attention. To address this, some Social Service departments are working on initiatives to develop separate, but linked, arrangements for drawing up Personal Educational Plans, with the aim of extending them to all looked after children (see Sandiford, forthcoming). Indeed, the processes of assessment and care planning are equally applicable to children in need, especially in planning appropriate and acceptable preventive work.

"I am a 17-year old girl, and I have been accommodated for four years, during which time I moved 22 times, across four regional divisions. As a result my schooling has been quite messed about... However unlike a great many young people I returned to school... I had a particularly good relationship with one teacher... I was also very lucky to have incredibly strong support from the staff in the home, who cajoled, conned and coerced me back into school. They kept telling me that I could succeed and made me believe it."

gaps and responses

As was explained at the outset, **research in practice** aims to make the exchange of useful information between local authorities easier and more fruitful. We have used this paper to stimulate discussion with local authority colleagues; this closing section lists some ideas for better practice drawn from the comments they made.

- In Devon there are hopes of publishing a good practice guide practice for social services and education staff, including schools, about the needs of young black people looked after. Oxford is working on something similar. East Sussex have provided a guide for carers—both residential workers and foster carers.
- Devon has identified a need for data collection systems capable of recording the attainments and special educational needs of young people looked after. There is little current information available nationally. The educational details kept on the Children Looked After System (CLAS) are inadequate. The only data the mainframe database holds are: name of school; school phone number; name of head teacher; start date at school; end date at school; and date of any exclusions
- There is general agreement about the value of 'a champion' where the education of young people is concerned but a lack of clarity about who should be in that role. For example, foster carers can also feel isolated in the educational decision making process, although they are the ones dealing on a day to day basis with the young person. The opposite danger is that everyone involved thinks that someone else is being the advocate for education when the reality is that no one is.
- Teachers during training or as part of their professional development could benefit from a module to consider the needs of young people in the care system. Something of the sort is in place at the University of Strathclyde.
- In addition to the work of those who attend exclusion meeting, more joint preventative work is wanted. Exclusions do not happen overnight; months even years of concern accumulate before a decision is made to exclude a child.
- In Durham two separate bids for funding have been amalgamated to bring 'under one roof' help for children at risk of dropping out of the education system and for children in the looked after system. Further help in the county is planned for young people returning to school after a period away from education and to support children who are in Women's Refuges.

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The quotes from young people in this paper are taken from the references which have an.

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