

Education and Lifelong Learning

The Educational Attainment of Looked after Children – Local Authority Pilot Projects: Final Research Summary

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The context for this research is the low achievement in education of looked after children and young people who are, as a consequence, less likely than other young people in Scotland to be engaged in education, employment or training by age 21. There has been a considerable body of research in the past 20 years about the education of looked after children and young people and care leavers. This literature has been concerned with achievement in education, statistical data collection and tracking, and the educational environment of care settings.

The policy context in Scotland is outlined in two key reports - Looked After Children & Young People: We Can and Must Do Better (Scottish Executive, 2007) and Count Us In: Improving the Education of Our Looked After Children (HMIE, 2008) – and a national programme known as Getting It Right For Every Child.

Main Findings

- Attendance at school improved among pilot participants, in all age groups, findings which were statistically significant among 9-10 year olds and those over 15. Instances of exclusion from school and the number of days excluded reduced significantly among young people over 15.
- About 40% of the young people advanced by one 5-14 National Assessment level, much better than the average progress reported for all looked after children and similar to advances made by non-looked after children.
- Younger looked after children who had high levels of involvement in pilot activities made appreciably more progress in one year than the others, measured by 5-14 National Assessments in reading and writing.
- Participation in flexible and individually tailored activities aimed at engaging looked after children and young people, was found to be more important than any particular activity or approach.
- The attitudes and values of project staff were found to be crucial in successful direct work with children and young people. Staff who believed in the children they were working with, treated them with respect and had high expectations for them, were more able to engage children successfully in their education.
- Practitioners emphasised the importance of stability and a sense of normality as the basis for achievement in education for looked after children and young people.
- Parents and carers derived support indirectly from interventions designed to improve the achievement of their children.

Background

The research involved reviewing pilot projects in 18 Scottish local authorities aimed at improving the educational attainment of looked after children and young people. The pilot projects were very different in both their aims and in the range of approaches employed. In relation to their work with looked after children and young people, they could be characterised by five different types of intervention: provision of direct support (e.g. extra tutoring in school or at home); personal education planning; support at transition points in the education system; developing staff and parent/capacity (e.g. training for staff and helping parents/carers to develop confidence in supporting looked after children and young people in their education); and using information technology and computer-based approaches.

“[Creating] the personal education plans: that went very well because the kids appreciated being so heavily involved in it and they’ve actually come up with what looks like an extremely good PEP, and that will be taken forward... Involving the young people in decision making, taking on their opinions ...has had a very big impact on the self-esteem of the young people.” (Project Co-ordinator)

Aim and objectives

The aim of the research was to identify interventions that appeared to make the most difference in terms of both the educational experience and the outcomes of looked after children and young people. Six research questions guided the study:

1. What were the characteristics of the pilot projects, including their aims, participants and staffing?
2. What was the impact of the pilot projects in relation to quantitative data, including school attendance, exclusion and measures of attainment?
3. What was the impact of the pilot projects according to the perceptions of the young people and their families, and those of the professionals who worked with them directly?
4. Did the projects meet their objectives? If not, or not entirely, what difficulties were encountered and how were these addressed by the pilot projects?
5. What enabling factors of success can be identified?
6. What lessons can be learned from the projects? How should this be reflected in guidance materials for practitioners?

Research approach

The research, conducted between September 2006 and June 2008, was divided into four phases. The first phase involved interviewing the co-ordinators of all the pilots, preparing a narrative description of the intentions and approaches of each project and creating summary tables describing the range of activities employed. The second phase involved collecting ‘baseline’ quantitative data for children and young people participating in all pilot projects in relation to their attendance at school, exclusions from school and attainment in National Assessments in the core skills of reading, writing and mathematics. The third phase involved carrying out fieldwork interviews with professionals and young people who had participated in the pilots, and collecting follow-up quantitative data on attendance, exclusions and attainment. The final phase involved conducting follow-up interviews with pilot co-ordinators.

“One of the comments that was made to me early on in the project which I thought actually typifies teachers’ perceptions of these children was: ‘Their problems are not in school, their problems are at home.’ And we are trying to explain, ‘No their problems come with them.’ I think that a very common perception that has to be challenged is that children should be able to leave their emotional baggage at the school door and I think that anyone who works with these children knows that this is just not a possibility.” (Project Co-ordinator)

Lessons from the process

The overall programme of very different pilot projects was very ambitious. There is evidence that many looked after young people derived significant benefit from their involvement in the projects. The programme included several examples of imaginative and innovative practice. The short timescale involved, however, combined with difficulties in recruiting suitable staff, caused organisational problems. It is likely that with a longer timescale more sustainable and transferable outcomes could have been achieved.

Previous research has shown that collecting robust data about the outcomes of looked after children and young people is problematic, and this finding was confirmed in the research with the pilot projects. The data tracking systems of many of the pilot local authorities were of variable quality, but the research process itself appears to have been helpful to the pilot authorities in relation to identifying weaknesses in tracking looked after children and young people and therefore in considering solutions.

“We also quickly realised that a pupil can be attending on a very part-time basis (as little as two hours weekly) and their attendance is registered as 100%. There is a school of thought that the pupil is attending to the best of their ability and 100% is an appropriate figure, but, it gives a very misleading impression of the amount of education this pupil is receiving, and the more worrying thing is that an undesirable minimum of attendance might easily go unnoticed by those who are not in direct contact with the pupil.” (Project Co-ordinator)

“J had been excluded 10 times throughout his three years of secondary schools. There were more in primary school. It's the same things he was having difficulty with. In the classroom he was fine - it was very manageable because they had supports there for him. But at lunch times and break times he was struggling big time with peer interactions and the lack of structure. We can't really go up there every day. So it was how we could provide support. [Name of project] are able to step in and support him.” (Residential Worker)

Impact of the pilots

In terms of impact, the most important theme emerging from the interviews with the practitioners was a general desire to increase achievement, while providing support for young people, their parents and carers and schools. Practitioners also emphasised the importance of stability and a sense of normality for looked after children and young people, as the basis of achievement in education.

There was a general worry expressed within the pilots about the realistic sustainability of the interventions once the pilot funding had ended. Nevertheless, some of the local authorities had plans to mainstream entire pilots and in others the experience of the pilots will influence future policy and practice.

“Direct contact with [teacher] makes you feel involved. Doesn't feel like [teacher] and the school are taking over. You get your say. Quite different from my previous experience. Has benefited me through the effect on [daughter] – she is a lot more tolerant of her brother. Happier house.” (Parent)

It was clear that parents and carers had derived immense support indirectly from interventions designed to improve the achievement of their children. They also indicated that involvement in pilot activities had made a positive impact on the self-esteem and confidence of their children.

Attendance at school improved among the pilot participants, in all age groups, findings which were statistically significant among 9-10 year olds and those over 15. The instances of exclusion and the number of days excluded reduced significantly amongst those young people over 15.

About 40% of the young people participating in the pilots advanced by one 5-14 National Assessment level, much better than the average progress reported for all looked after children and similar to advances made by non-looked after children nationally. Again, this finding was statistically significant.

Younger looked after children who had high levels of involvement in the pilots appeared to have made appreciably more progress in one year than the others, measured by 5-14 National Assessments in reading and writing. This is encouraging because it also suggests that providing targeted additional support can raise attainment.

The research identified effects related to the involvement of the young people in the pilots, but the data available did not allow us to attribute these effects to particular activities. It is likely that, in line with previous research findings, high engagement with study-related, cultural and sport activities in general is more important than the actual nature of the activity. Local authorities and voluntary agencies should therefore be encouraged to make provision of a range of activities capable of engaging looked after children and young people.

“I'm quite thankful because if I wasn't at school, I'd be a low-life, uneducated delinquent and wouldn't be able to get a proper job....If I want something, I take it seriously and I won't stop until I get it. I'm thinking about university or law school.” (Young Person)

Key factors of success

Individualising the approach (keeping the child at the centre), being flexible, including involving the young person to choose the focus of learning, and providing a breadth of learning

opportunities appear to be important strategies for effective work aimed at improving the achievements of looked after children and young people.

The research highlighted the importance of staff engaged in supporting the achievement of looked after children and young people having appropriate values and attitudes. This included believing in the fundamental worth of a young person, having high expectations and being flexible in their approaches.

“We’ve established a kind of culture within the house that homework is a priority. It generally gets done. ...Quite often it will get done on the computers and the young folk will type stuff up, then they’ll print it off and they’ll be able to bring that into school. For some of the older kids that are maybe doing their standard grades, they’ll quite readily use the machines to do some research projects.” (Residential Unit Manager)

The attitudes and values of project staff were found to be crucial in successful direct work with children and their families. Staff who believed in the children they were working with, treated them with respect and had high expectations for them, were more able to engage children successfully in their education.

Flexibility, trusting relationships between project staff and young people that continued over time, and activities that encouraged the development of resilience in young people,

were most successful. These were particularly important at key transition points in the school careers of children and young people.

Conclusion

The research confirmed previous findings of poor record keeping and monitoring in relation to the education of looked after children and young people. If being actively engaged can pay dividends quickly, it is sad that so many looked after children and young people seem to get lost in the system. This means that for some their achievements will go unrecognised and uncelebrated, while others will not get the support they need.

A few simple measures would improve monitoring. All pupils who are looked after should have their attendance and attainment recorded by the school in which they are registered, even where education is taking place off-site for some or all of the time. Actual attendance should always be recorded. Where a period of part-time education has been agreed, full attendance should not be recorded when a pupil attends for all of the part-time period, and the correct proportion should be calculated. The school’s designated senior manager (DSM) should track attendance and achievement throughout the school year, as well as providing information for child care reviews. A system of periodic review of progress (perhaps monthly) by a key officer or a committee at local authority level should be regarded as good practice.

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