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Children in Need and Children in Care: Educational Attainment and Progress

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About the research

Research shows that the educational attainments of Children in Need (CIN) and Children in Care (CIC) in England are significantly lower than for other pupils. This represents sizeable numbers of children: the latest figures (March 2019) showed that there were 399,500 Children in Need in England and 78,150 Children in Care. The 'attainment gap' between these groups and other children (without special educational needs) in reaching expected standards is approximately 25-30% at Key Stage 1 (aged 7) and KS2 (aged 11), and 25% at KS4 (aged 16).

Researchers have often investigated the education of Children in Care; however, *Children in Need* have received very little attention. This project aimed to identify factors that help explain this 'attainment gap' for Children in Need and Children in Care. It examined the educational attainments and progress of children who experienced being In Need or In Care at some stage of their schooling in England; it analysed the factors associated with attainments at Key Stage 4 (16 years); it investigated how we can account for children who succeed in their GCSE exams at 16 despite experiencing severe early adversity requiring social work intervention; and it explored parents', children's and professionals' views on the factors affecting educational progress for Children in Need and Children in Care.

The research involved:

- Statistical analysis of data from a whole birth cohort of children (471,688) born in England in 2000/01, starting school in 2006/07 and tracked through to their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams in 2017

- Interviews with 123 children, parents/carers, social workers, teachers and managers.

Children in Need are those receiving social work services due to concerns over their health or development, or because they are disabled. They usually remain living with birth parents or relatives, supported by a multi-agency Children in Need Plan (CINP); or, when there are greater concerns over safety, by a Child Protection Plan (CPP)

Children in Care usually live away from birth families with foster carers or in residential homes, in situations where there have been major concerns about significant harm to the child.

The main reasons for becoming CIN or CIC are abuse or neglect, family dysfunction, family in acute stress or when children are disabled.

This report contains valuable information for policy makers, social work managers, school leaders, social workers, teachers and carers to improve the education and care of Children in Need and Children in Care.

Key findings:

The research highlighted that as many as 1 in 7 of all children, at some stage of their schooling, experienced a period as a Child in Need or a Child in Care. These children had lower attainment at each Key Stage of schooling than children who never needed a social worker. A substantial part of the relatively low attainment at age 16 of pupils who had ever been In Need or In Care was accounted for by information available at age 7: the child's attainment at 7, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and special educational needs and disabilities. This suggests that broader forms of disadvantage – which were more prevalent in these groups than in other children – had a lasting effect on children's educational attainments throughout their schooling.

Findings from the statistical analysis and interviews were combined into four main themes.

Greater attention required to Children in Need

The overwhelming majority of interventions – three-quarters – were as Children In Need. In terms of volume, therefore, social work is clearly dominated by Children in Need services. There is much discussion in social work and education about Children in Care, but Children in Need as a group receive much less attention. This should change. CIN are a much bigger group than CIC and share many of their characteristics and disadvantages. Most Children in Care had previously been Children in Need, so focusing attention on one group but not the other is counter-productive.

Another important finding was that most parents of Children in Need interviewed said that they were living in poverty and, despite personal sacrifice, found it very difficult to afford what their children needed for school – uniforms, computers, internet access etc. In contrast, most foster carers looking after Children in Care said that they could provide what was needed for children's education.

I would say the uniform is very expensive because last year he had a lot of anxiety and he was chewing his uniform. I had to buy three or four jumpers, £15 plus £3 for the postage, multiply by four or five that's a lot of money you know. And obviously I don't want him to go to school with a chewed jumper, not for any question to be raised and things like that.

(Parent)

Importance of early intervention

Given the number of children who received social work services – 1 in 7 – and that more serious interventions usually began as Children in Need, it is sensible to address family problems as soon as they begin with high quality, early intervention services. Although most children experienced only one intervention and circumstances can change, overall there was much instability. As many as a fifth experienced another social work intervention within a year after the previous one ending, and 13% experienced 4 or more periods of intervention in total. A quarter of all children who had been receiving a service had a social worker in the final year of their GCSEs. Their problems are likely to have affected their learning and exam results.

Instability in children's care and education

Taking other factors into account, children with multiple periods of intervention achieved lower educational attainments than those with fewer. This might reflect the chronic problems that families were experiencing but earlier resolution of problems could have been possible and desirable. Children who entered Care or had moved to live with relatives often spoke of the improved stability and consistency in their lives.

> **I think in the last nine months he's improving and because he's calm, he's in a settled environment, he knows I'm going to be here when he comes in, he knows what time he's going to get his tea. Prior to that he had sort of said that he was worried when he was at school he was worried about what his mum was doing, is his mum okay, is the police going to be at the door when he comes home, are they going to be fighting. He hasn't got those worries anymore and I think that is a massive problem for children, when they've got things going on in the family home and I think that's why he couldn't learn, he couldn't concentrate.**
>
> **(Grandparent)**

For the group experiencing early adversity, a long-term stay in Care (over a year) before the end of secondary school benefited their educational attainment. However, a higher number of placement changes was linked with poorer attainment and their experiences in secondary school were also important.

School instability was also related to KS4 exam results: missing a greater number of possible school sessions through absences or fixed-term/permanent exclusions, and changing school in Years 10 or 11, were all predictors of poorer attainment. From interviews, school transfer was usually taken in their stride by children making good educational progress but was much more difficult for others, especially for Children in Need. In general, evidence indicated that pupils in mainstream schools made better educational progress than those in alternative provision such as pupil referral units (PRUs). Supporting children with their social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties was also felt to benefit their education.

The nature of secondary schooling and educational policy for vulnerable learners

The general impression from our interviews was that primary schools were often more flexible than secondary schools, being inclusive institutions that were able to cope with children's difficulties; whereas there was much more variation in how secondary schools responded. Not all schools were described by children, parents and social workers as understanding or sympathetic to children's difficulties. This reflected sometimes an inflexible approach to academic excellence and school discipline.

> **So it's just making sure that all staff are aware of where it's coming from … It's just having that understanding. … It's just making sure that our responses to behaviours that we're seeing are appropriate, that we're looking beyond the behaviour and just checking in on those children.**
>
> **(Teacher)**

Relationships with teachers and teaching styles emerged as very important for children, in order for them to be confident and participate in class, producing their best results.

Implications for policy and practice

- Efforts to increase the visibility of the Children in Need group should continue, including proposals contained in the Government's *Children in Need Review* (2019). This should include raising the profile of the Children in Need group within schools.

- There would be strong advantages in Virtual Schools, or a similar service, overseeing Children in Need as well as Children in Care. This would need additional resource.

- There is a case for Pupil Premium Plus (PPP) payments (currently £2,300 per annum for Children in Care and former CIC) to be extended in some form to Children in Need.

- Approaches that address the impact of poverty on education should be promoted (for example 'Poverty Proofing the School Day' http://www.povertyproofing. co.uk/, in which affordability of schooling is taken into account in school policies.

- We recommend a review of decision making procedures surrounding 'case closure' so that families are not left without adequate support.

- Teacher training for pupils' well-being should include the specific circumstances of Children in Need and Children in Care, for example, 'attachment awareness' issues.

- There should be less variation across secondary schools in their inclusiveness: including reducing permanent and fixed-term exclusions, and monitoring the impact of disciplinary codes on Children in Need and Children in Care.

Nuffield Foundation

Further information

This study was a collaboration between the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol and the Rees Centre, University of Oxford.

Download a copy of the full research report from here

Download a copy of the Nuffield Foundation Executive Summary from here

A resource is in preparation for use with Children in Care concerning their experiences of Care and education and will be available soon.

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