

Educational Support Services provided by Independent Foster Care Providers (IFPs) – Executive summary

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Context

In 2005, only 11% of 'looked after' children obtained 5 good GCSEs compared with 56% of all children, and there were similar performance gaps at other stages (DfES 2006). The Government is committed to tackling this long-standing problem, and has highlighted the need for care providers to have much higher aspirations for children and to support them in achieving good educational outcomes (DfES 2006).

These issues need to be addressed not only by local authorities but also independent foster care providers (IFPs), who on 31st March 2007 were caring for 16% of all 'looked after' children in the UK (DCSF 2007). IFPs often justify their high charges by saying that they provide specialist services and accept children who are hard to place. A survey of 55 IFPs (Sellick and Connolly 2002) found that although IFPs were used for sibling placements (20%), ethnicity matching (10%) and specialist services (10%), in 37% of cases the primary reason was that no local authority placement was available.

It is often claimed that children looked after by IFPs get better educational results than those in local authority foster care, but this has not been established. Moreover, even if these claims can be substantiated with regard to individual IFPs, we do not know which elements of their service lead to better educational outcomes.

Aims of the study

The aims of this small scale study, funded by DCSF, were:

- To begin to test claims that IFPs produce better educational results than local authorities;
- To identify elements of best practice with regard to providing educational support services for 'looked after' children in independent foster care.

IFPs participating in the study

Seven IFPs were contacted and invited to participate in the research. Five (all rated highly in CSCI inspection reports) agreed to take part. This included:

- **Agency A** - a 'for profit' IFP managed centrally with three regional offices each with their own culture and varying age ranges of children;
- **Agency B** - a small 'not for profit' IFP;
- **Agency C** - a large 'for profit' IFP managed centrally and with the same model of service provision throughout the country;
- **Agency D** - a large fostering charity with three regional offices;
- **Agency E** - a national children's charity which provides a wide range of children's services including 15 small fostering services.

Study design, samples, data collection and analysis

The study used a qualitative and quantitative design to provide data on the children in the five IFPs, their educational outcomes and the support services provided.

A census of children in the five IFPs

The five IFPs were asked to provide a census of ALL their looked after children at 1st January 2007 and to supply their educational results for comparison with those of the LAC population as a whole and of children in the general population. Two IFPs were only able to provide data from some of their regional offices or fostering projects, and the data from a third IFP could not be analysed as the educational results were averaged and not broken down into separate subject areas. Due to limited resources we were unable to do an independent check on the data provided.

The comparison study

To identify any improvements in outcomes, the IFPs were also asked to provide data on children over age 6 at entry, because Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) are first used with children in year 2. Children with physical disabilities and those whose placements were intended to last less than 90 days were excluded.

The IFPs were asked to collect the same set of data for two time points: first when the children were placed with them between 1st April 2004 and 31st March 2005, and secondly on 1st April 2006 when the children had been with them for at least a year. The data included children's educational attainment, placement stability, number of school moves, whether they had personal education plans (PEPs), their involvement with CAMHS, statements of special educational needs (SEN), absence from school, exclusions, out of school hours learning (OSHL) and the number of teenagers aged 16+ in further education or training.

The data we requested were not readily available on the IFPs' management databases and systems, so they had to assemble the information from case file searches. In doing this, they found that information requested from local authorities had not always been supplied. Hence there were many gaps in the data.

Agencies B and D were able to provide data for all children who entered their care between 1st April 2004 and 31st March 2005. However, due to the work involved in compiling the data, it was agreed that Agency C should provide data on children in 1 region, Agency A on children in 3 regions and Agency E on children in 5 projects.

The quantitative data were entered on Excel data sheets and were analysed within Excel and in SPSS

Qualitative data

To understand more about the services offered by the IFPs, a researcher phoned each agency to discuss a) their educational support services, b) the support they provide for foster carers, and c) the factors they considered important for educational success.

Findings from the census of children in the five IFPs

The number of children cared for by the IFPs differed greatly, varying from 37 to 2,066 children. Most were teenagers, but four of the agencies cared for some very young children as well. As babies are generally thought to be easier to place, we were surprised that 12% of the children in one IFP were less than three years old.

All the IFPs were caring for slightly more boys than girls, and most of the children were of white ethnic origin. Although black and minority ethnic children make up 21% of the national looked after population, three IFPs were providing placements for higher proportions of these children, particularly children of mixed ethnicity.

When the children's **key stage results** were compared with those of the total LAC population and the general population, overall the children from the five IFPs seemed to be doing better than the national average for looked after children except for those in Agency B – but their results were based on only three pupils. The children in Agency A seemed to be doing as well as children in the general population in the key stage 2 results.

Looking at the **GCSE results**, the young people cared for by the five IFPs again seemed to do better than 'looked after' children generally. Many gained at least one GCSE and, in this respect, the proportions were equivalent or nearly equivalent to the figures for the general population. However, the data on the number of eligible young people was not reliable, so the percentages of pass rates were based only on those who were entered for GCSEs.

The statistics for young people obtaining 5 GCSEs at grade A* to G and 5 GCSEs at A* to C showed that there was still a big gap between these young people and those in the general population. However, in three IFPs, nine out of ten teenagers aged 16+ were involved in **further education or training**.

Comparison study findings – educational progress after 1 year (n=165)

Children leaving care

Although children in short-term placements (less than 90 days) were excluded from the study, surprisingly high percentages left Agencies A, B and C before the second round of data collection (46% of children in A, 70% in B and 42% in C – a total of **58** children. However, no children left the two fostering charities. It is worrying that placements that were not intended to be short-term lasted on average only 11 months.

The data collection did not include reasons for leaving so we cannot explain these findings. The high proportions of children leaving affected the second round of data collection, but the IFPs often provided second stage data for children who had left (e.g. with regard to exclusions and CAMHS) and we included this.

Missing data

The IFPs were asked what information they had been given when the child was first placed with them, focussing mainly on issues relevant to education. Such information is essential if agencies are to support children appropriately but, as Figure 2.1 shows, this information was not provided at the start of most placements. More information was available at the second stage (Figure 2.2) but there were still considerable gaps.

The considerable amount of missing data indicates that the IFPs did not have good information management systems for recording educational data – and three of them acknowledged this. It also meant that we had insufficient data comparable across the two points in time to gauge any improvement in educational outcomes.

Figure 2.1. Percentages of missing data at the start of the children's IFP placements ($n=165$)

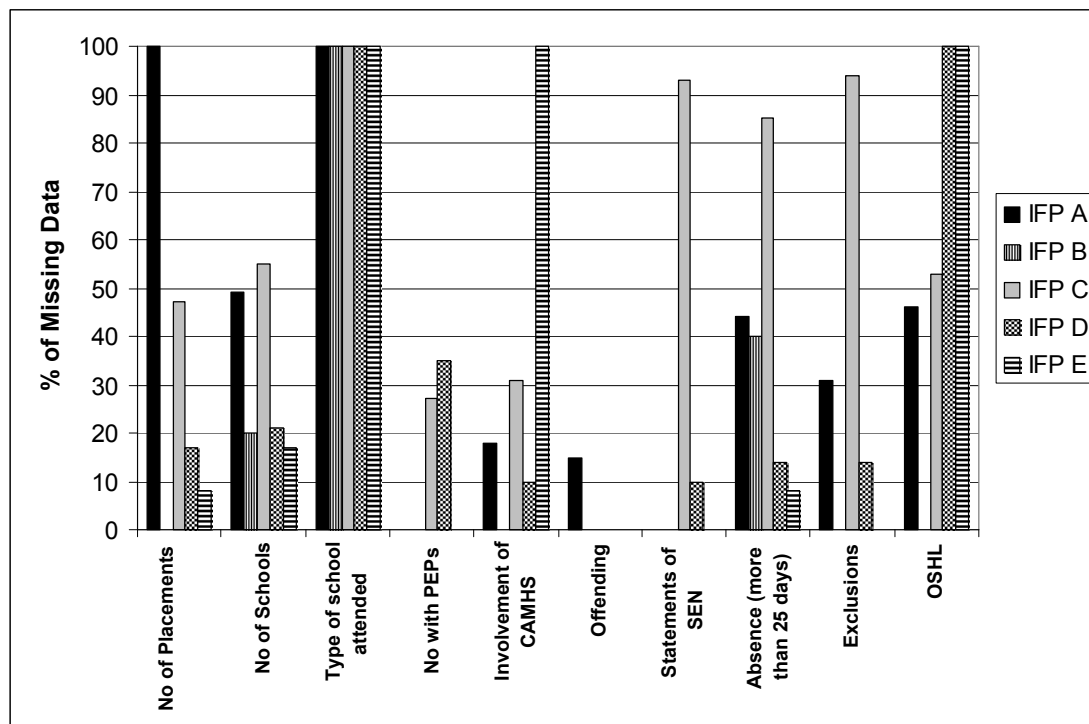
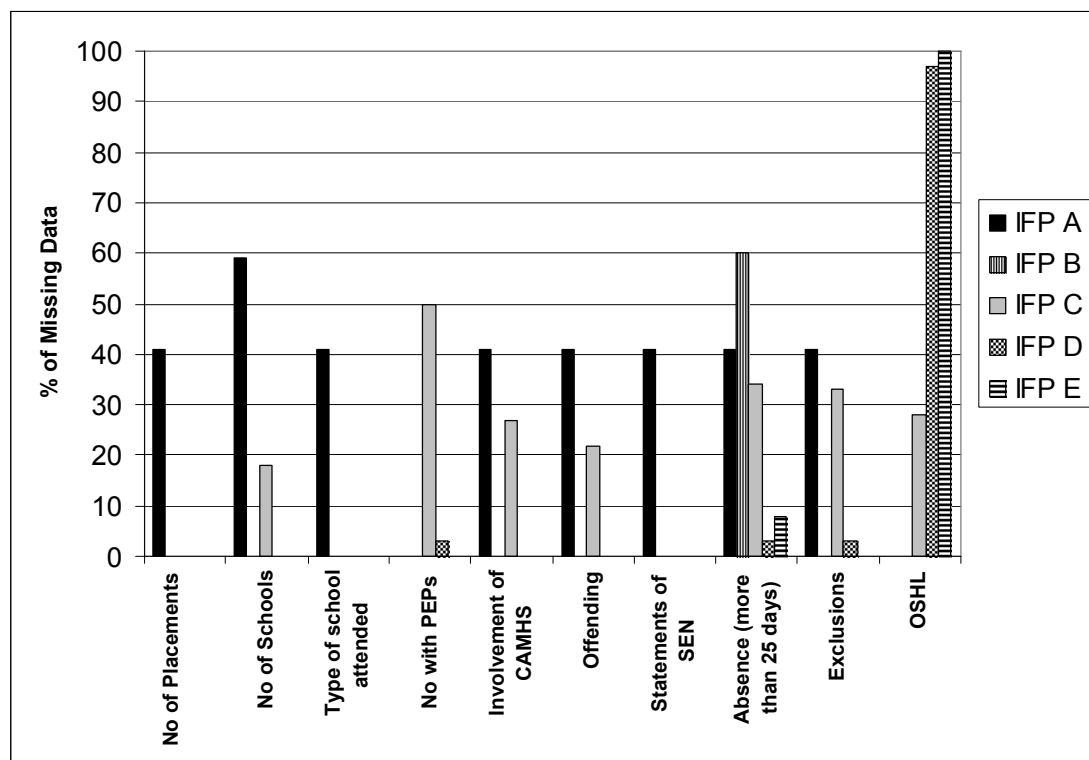


Figure 2.2. Percentages of missing data on the children at the second round of data collection ($n=117-149$)



Placement stability

As frequent placement changes adversely affect children's education, we asked how many placements each child had before their IFP placement. Based on information available for only half of the 165 children, they had had 0-10 previous placements, the average being almost two per child. However, a few children with previous disrupted placements seemed to have achieved some stability.

Do IFPs care for children with more complex needs?

During phone interviews the five IFPs all expressed the opinion that the children in their care usually have more complex needs than children in local authority foster care. We were unable to substantiate this, but there was some supporting evidence:

- The vast majority of the 52 children who were referred to CAMHS after being placed with an IFP received this service, suggesting that about a quarter of the 165 children were recognised as having urgent mental health needs.
- More than a fifth of the 165 children (34) were excluded from school after the start of their IFP placement, suggesting that many had behavioural problems.
- About a fifth (32) of the 165 children had a history of offending, and 10 committed offences after their placement started – but only three re-offended.
- Many children and young people were being educated in special schools. (Due to unreliable data we cannot say how many of the 165 children had SEN).

The views of the independent foster care providers

Providing educational support

The five IFPs identified a range of tasks involved in providing educational support for children. These included: researching the child's educational history, assessing the child's educational needs, arranging an appropriate school placement, monitoring progress, liaising with schools and colleges, attending PEP meetings, providing 'catch-up' tuition, working alongside the child in school, training and supporting the foster carer to meet the child's educational needs, providing support packages for children not attending school, helping young people to plan their further education, organising out of school hours learning opportunities, and celebrating the educational successes of children and young people. Funding determined the extent to which the IFPs could undertake some or all of these tasks.

Educational staff

The two 'for profit' IFPs both employed qualified and experienced teachers to ensure that children had appropriate school placements and educational support. The 'not for project' IFP had commissioned the National Teaching and Advisory Service to provide educational support as part of their service, but local authorities often refused to pay for this. The national children's charity had an education co-ordinator to provide advice, a small team of educational psychologists working with fostering projects caring for young people with exceptionally high needs, and they bought in tutoring from qualified teachers. The other fostering charity had arranged informally for staff to obtain advice from educational specialists when necessary.

Agencies A, C and D employed ‘resource workers’ or ‘educational support workers’ to support children in school, organise out of school activities, and provide day care or education-based outings for those not attending school. They were not highly paid, but were expected to have a relevant qualification or encouraged to attend training.

The two fostering charities had to rely on schools to assess children’s educational needs and to provide information about their educational history, but this could be “very hit and miss”. Both depended on their supervising social workers to monitor educational progress and to attend school meetings with the foster carer.

Planning and providing educational support

Four IFPs used a casework model for providing educational support. The fifth used a ‘team parenting’ model based on a systemised therapeutic approach. They all stressed the importance of sharing information with everyone involved with the child.

IFPs who employed or commissioned teachers had more structured processes for planning educational support. This teacher was responsible for discussing the child’s educational needs with the foster carer, school staff and local authority social worker and for preparing an education plan and ensuring it was implemented. In addition to this, in Agency A teachers provided most of the educational support and all the primary school children did the Salford reading test, were re-assessed biannually and were the subject of an education planning meeting at the start of each term.

Training and supporting foster carers to meet children’s educational needs

As well as the mandatory training which all foster carers receive, the five IFPs provided extra sessions e.g. on supporting children’s learning, dealing with bullying and managing challenging behaviour. In Agency C therapists trained carers and other staff on how to understand and respond to attachment issues. Specialist training resources used by some IFPs included training by the Advisory Centre for Education (ACE) and an interactive website called Learn Premium.

The five IFPs all expected their foster carers to show interest in the child’s education by attending parents’ evenings, other school events and PEP discussions, ensuring regular school attendance, and helping children with their homework. In one IFP foster carers were required to take responsibility for the child’s education, arranging a school place if necessary, liaising closely with the school, recording the child’s progress and involvement in activities, and notifying social workers about concerns.

The IFPs all provided 24 hour telephone support for foster carers every day of the year, and supervising social workers visited at regular intervals varying from one to three weeks but more frequently if necessary. They also provided practical support or respite care, if the carer needed a break or help in caring for the child.

Working directly with children and young people

The IFPs all said they consulted children about their education and encouraged children to provide feedback on their fostering services and talk about any concerns. They did this by talking to children, sending out questionnaires, arranging support groups, organising events or setting up a ‘national children’s forum’ and a ‘young people’s board’. The larger IFPs celebrated children’s educational successes by

holding an annual achievement day or perhaps giving them a certificate saying ‘Well done! You’ve had a good week at school’ or a £5 book token.

Out of school hours learning

The two ‘for profit’ IFPs provided a considerable range of social, leisure and sports activities for the children and young people, including outings, trips to the zoo, art galleries and theatres, football tournaments, swimming, creative workshops and Christmas parties. Once a year Agency D took young people away for a weekend of team building in situations such as abseiling, where they could explore how they managed their behaviour and related to other young people.

Dealing with difficulties

The five IFPs said they expected carers to report any non-attendance, and when youngsters were excluded they negotiated with the school to try to find a solution. If there was a delay in schools meeting their statutory duty to provide learning support for children with SEN, three IFPs had the staff or money to meet this need in the short term. Agency C said they also offered advice on dealing with attachment issues.

Preparing teenagers for further education, employment and independence

The termination of fostering allowances was seen as a major problem in helping teenagers make the transition to adulthood. The IFPs generally responded to this situation by making every effort to encourage young people in their care to enter further education.

For example, education liaison officers in Agency C visited all young people in year 11 to discuss their aspirations and whether they needed help with their GCSEs, and they trained foster carers in post 16 opportunities and gave young people college prospectuses or help in looking for jobs. Similarly, Agency A consulted teenagers about further education, took them to college open days, helped them to apply for courses and the education maintenance allowance, and they also ran an independence group for teenagers focussing on budgeting, job interview and CVs.

The smallest IFP had compiled a pack called *Preparation for Moving towards Independence*, which looked at every aspect of life – housing, employment, money, relationships, health, rights and responsibilities – explaining what young people needed to know and setting them tasks so they could acquire skills such as learning to sew or identifying whom they could talk to, if they had a problem. They also had a full-time worker to support care leavers and maintain appropriate links with them.

What enables foster children to benefit from their education?

The five IFPs all stated that children and young people were likely to do better at school, if they had the stability of a good and continuing relationship with their carer.

Limitations, conclusions and issues for consideration

We could not substantiate IFP claims of better educational outcomes for children, because of the large amount of missing data, and because many children left their placements before the second round of data collection. The validity of the data was also compromised, because it was supplied by the IFPs and we could not verify it.

While we were able to describe and discuss the variety of services provided by the five IFPs, due to the differences in sampling frames and the dearth of statistical information we could not compare results across IFPs. Nor could we identify the factors or approaches that were most effective in improving educational outcomes.

Conclusions

Despite their favourable CSCI reports, the five IFPs did not appear to have good management information systems for recording data relating to the education of children and young people in their care. There were delays in supplying the data because it had to be compiled through care file searches and problems in comparing data due to the use of different formats. Local authorities often failed to provide essential information about the child when the IFP placement was set up.

Perhaps the most significant finding in the comparison study was that about a third of the children and young people had left before the second round of data collection, although their placements were not intended to be short-term. Yet, this finding only applied to three IFPs, as none had left the two fostering charities. The average time until a child left independent foster care was 11 months (range 3-29 months). This raises questions about the stability of IFP placements and their ability to achieve any lasting improvement in children's educational outcomes, behaviour and well-being.

Educational data for all the children cared for by the five IFPs as at 1st January 2007 suggested that they were achieving better results than the 'looked after' population as a whole. However, this finding has limited validity due to missing data and the small numbers of children on which some of the percentages were based.

There is some evidence to support claims that IFPs are caring for children who are 'hard to place'. The high numbers of youngsters receiving services from CAMHS and previously excluded from school or involved in offending suggested that they might have more complex needs. Also, three IFPs were providing for higher percentages of black and minority ethnic children than the national average.

A systemised approach to collecting and recording data

There is an urgent need for IFPs to improve their management information systems. It would be very helpful if the Government worked with IFPs to develop a simple universal data recording system with the same outcome indicators as those required of local authorities, so IFPs can assess and publicise their own outcomes more efficiently while providing useful information for those who are commissioning their services.

Provision of information when placements are being set up

One way to ensure IFPs receive information about the child quickly would be for the government to issue guidance for schools and children's services and set time limits.

The need for further research

We need to find out what factors and what educational support improve 'looked after' children's educational outcomes; what evidence supports IFP claims about caring for children with complex needs and achieving better educational outcomes; how IFPs compare with regard to placement stability and why so many placements end within a year in some IFPs; whether IFP placements are value for money; and what it would cost to provide good educational support for 'looked after' children generally.