**A systematic review of interventions to support looked after children in school**

**Abstract:** A systematic review of interventions to support looked after children in school included interventions that aimed to improve attainment, or prevent drop-out or exclusions, and those that aimed to reduce absenteeism in the care population. Studies were critically appraised and their results considered. No study was found robust enough to provide evidence on effectiveness, but promising interventions were identified. The review highlights the lack of evidence in an area which has received a lot of policy attention in the past few years. Future evaluations need to be underpinned by lessons learned from existing evaluations, clearly defined theories and definitions, and by the views of professionals, researchers, policy makers and young people in care.

**INTRODUCTION**

The educational outcomes for looked after children are poor compared to the general population (Weyts 2004). In the UK, 12% of looked after children gained 5 or more A-C GCSEs compared with 31% of those with free school meals (Department for Education 2010a; Department for Education 2010b). Education is important to later health (Lleras-Muney 2005), and can prevent substance abuse and unemployment. From a child’s perspective, dropping out of school can mean they lose out on enjoyable activities and engagement with peers.

Reasons for low achievement have been identified in the care system, seen not to prioritise education in the face of placement difficulties and emotional needs. Their care home environment may lack books, educational materials, or an appropriate study area (Hatton & Marsh 2007). Low expectations have been identified, resulting in looked after children not being encouraged to try and not receiving the support they need (Heath *et al.* 1994; Jackson & Sachdev 2001). Pre-care experiences of abuse and neglect also impact negatively on school attainment (Berridge 2007; Heath *et al.* 1994). The fact that educational achievement for this group tends to be poor internationally indicates that much of the problem lies outside of the system (Weyts 2004).

The effectiveness of social care interventions is largely under-researched in general (Stevens *et al.* 2009), and research on looked after children presents particular issues in terms of access and the number of gatekeepers involved (Heptinstall 2000). The objective of this review was to identify effectiveness evaluations of interventions aimed at supporting looked after children to stay in school, or improve their attainment.

The review was conducted in collaboration with looked after young people and care leavers who were involved in all stages of the research. The group is currently writing a separate paper describing their involvement.

**METHODS**

The review included interventions targeted at children aged 10-15 in mainstream schools who had been placed by the authorities to live outside of their family setting. The age limit was set because it encompassed the transition from primary to secondary school.

The intervention had to support the attainment or improve the attendance of looked after children, and be delivered to carers, children, or professionals, or implemented at a strategic level, such as reorganization of services or introduction of new procedures. The main outcomes of interest were final year exams, exclusion numbers, attendance numbers, literacy and numeracy. This facilitated a manageable search strategy, but limited the scope of the review, as it excluded important outcomes such as mental health, motivation and satisfaction. On the other hand this put our focus on outcomes currently set as UK government targets, enabling us to identify studies of particular relevance to these.

Studies had to have made attempts at measuring outcomes at baseline and follow-up, due to the review’s focus on effectiveness outcomes. The decision to include studies without a comparison group reflect the expectation of available research, and the view that uncontrolled studies have a value in identifying promising interventions, and contain information on implementation that is useful to future research and development of interventions. No minimum length to follow-up measures was set, nor was there any lower limit on sample size, because we wanted to identify all attempts at measuring effect in this area. Study design was factored into the quality assessment.

Searches were conducted in March-June 2010 in: Educational Resource Information Centre (ERIC), Dissertation Abstracts, International Bibliography of Social Sciences (IBSS), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), Conference Proceedings Citation Index (CPCI), the Social Psychological Educational and Criminological Trials Register of the Campbell Collaboration (C2-SPECTR), the Australian Education Index (AEI), the British Education Index (BEI), Social Policy and Practice, Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), Embase, Medline, PsychInfo, the Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials (CENTRAL), and Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL).

The following string of search terms served as the basis for all searches: (looked after child$ or adopt$ or residential care or in care or foster$ or accommodated child$ or group home$1 or care order$1 or special guardian$ or placement$1 or orphan$ or children$ home or public care or custod$ or child$ welfare or unaccompanied asylum seeker$1 or welfare care) AND child$ or young person$1 or young people or boy$1 or girl$ or teenage$ or schoolchild$ or youth$1 or adolescent$ or juvenile$ AND (education or school) adj4/near4 (attendance$1 or nonattendance$1 or absenteeism$1 or exclusion$ or expel$ or suspension$1 or dropout$1 or drop out$1 or truan$ or refus$ or phobia or disengag$ or attainment or result$1 or exam$1 or complet$ or support$ or stay in school or stay in education or achieve$ or success)

Free text searches were conducted in English only, in title and abstract, and matched to subject headings or mesh terms. No date or language limits were set. Google was searched, and the websites of the following organisations scanned: Who Cares Trust, Fostering Network, Princes Trust, A National Voice, Brooks, NCH Action for Children, Barnardo’s, Voice of the Child in Care, Shaftesbury young people, and the NSPCC. The website ‘Social Programs that Work’ was searched, as was the bibliographies of relevant reviews and studies. UK researchers with expertise in looked after children’s education were contacted. Authors of a Campbell review of drop-out interventions scanned their bibliography for studies that focused on looked after children.

All search hits were imported into the EPPI-Reviewer 4, a web-based electronic software for managing systematic reviews, informed by experiences from more than 200 reviews supported by or carried out at the EPPI-Centre (<http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms>). EPPI-Reviewer facilitates electronic import of all search hits and supports screening, critical appraisal and synthesis of results. A screening tool was tested on selected hits. During this process the protocol was changed to include studies that had measured attainment. The search had focused on drop-out interventions, and some interventions to improve attainment may therefore have been missed. For example, our search strategy did not include the term ‘tutor$’. Twenty-four percent of all electronic abstracts were double screened and included studies coded in EPPI-Reviewer.

Studies were tabulated on population, setting, intervention focus, outcomes, publication year, and study quality criteria (comparison group, sample size, how outcomes were measured). Interventions varied considerably and meta-analysis was deemed inappropriate because of the wide variety within programmes and study design. A descriptive review of each study was conducted. The studies were then grouped into categories based on the content and nature of the interventions, grouping similar approaches together. The findings were considered under each of these.

**RESULTS**

The electronic search strategy identified 6514 study abstracts (figure 1). The flow diagram of search hits shows key stages in the screening process resulting in the inclusion of 11 studies.

(Flow diagram 1: Overview of search hits)

**Study characteristics**

Of the 11 studies that filled the criteria of this review, six were before-after evaluations without a comparison group, four were policy evaluations of implementation processes and outcomes, and one was a before-after study with a non-equivalent comparison group. The policy evaluations focused mainly on the process of implementation and the views of key stakeholders. It may therefore seem like a misconception to assess their reliability in terms of their outcome findings. However, they did address the impact of the interventions and fit with the review’s aim to identify all attempts at measuring impact in this field. All included studies and their key characteristics are show in table 1.

(Table 1: Study characteristics)

From the content of these interventions six categories emerged: strategic interventions, pilot intervention of spending targeted money, residential school, community project, reading encouragement, and tutoring.

*Strategic interventions*

Strategic interventions were applied at an organisational level, to change policy and practice to support an improvement in looked after children’s educational outcomes. Strategic interventions tried to strengthen the relationship and communication between education and social care services, and focused on changing practice rather than providing direct support, although some included initiatives that worked directly with children and young people.

There were three studies of such interventions. Two were English policy pilots: one pilot implemented in three local authorities (Harker *et al.* 2004) and one evaluation of the Virtual School Heads pilot implemented across eleven authorities (Berridge *et al.* 2009). The third evaluation was a US study looking at the impact of having an educational specialist to advise social workers on educational issues (Zetlin *et al.* 2004).

*Pilot of spending targeted money*

One study evaluated a Scottish pilot of 18 authorities who were given money to improve the educational attainment of their looked after children (Connelly *et al.* 2008). While the report presents process findings from individual projects, the outcome findings relate to children from across the authorities.

The projects provided five main categories of support: direct support (e.g. tutoring, mentoring, nurture groups, book parcels), personal education planning, transition support (between primary and secondary school), staff development, and provision of technological support (e.g. computers, internet access).

*Residential school*

One US study evaluated outcomes for a residential education programme for young people in care (Jones & Lansdverk 2006). The aim was to provide young people with a stable placement that would support them through high school and prepare them for further education or work, and facilitate permanent relationships that would last beyond their time in the school.

*Community project*

One US study evaluated a community initiative which combined mentoring, carer involvement and vocational support for young people in foster care (Lee *et al.* 1989). The intervention was based on the ecological systems theory which argues that the environment and the youth can both be changed. The project directed its efforts to "improving the transactions between youth and their environment, enhancing the adaptive and coping capabilities of the youth, and improving their environment"(p6).

*Reading encouragement*

Two UK studies evaluated interventions aimed at encouraging looked after children to read, with the hope that this would improve their literacy. The Letterbox Club sent monthly parcels in the post to looked after children, containing books, maths games and stationery (Griffiths *et al.* 2009). The Reading Rich intervention included book gifts, worked directly with residential care homes to improve their reading environment, and initiated activities to encourage reading and writing (Finn 2008).

*Tutoring*

Tutoring is often initiated by birth parents to boost their children’s exam results and thereby their chances of getting into particular schools or universities. Interventions in this category aimed to provide looked after children with the same opportunity, to catch up with their class mates or prepare for final year exams. Three studies evaluated tutoring. Two UK pilots evaluated Catch Up, a structured tutoring programme delivered by foster carers and teaching assistants (Fraser *et al.* 2008; Worsley & Beverley 2008). One US study compared three different tutoring approaches delivered by volunteers (Lustig 2008).

**Study quality**

There was a wide range of study designs and methods in these evaluations, the main concerns being lack of a control group, lack of accurate reporting of numbers, small samples sizes and large loss to follow-up. Because of this, none of these studies would have met the inclusion criteria usually required for a Cochrane or Campbell review on the effectiveness of an intervention (2008).

In spite of methodological weaknesses, many of the studies are examples of complex interventions where considerable effort was made to measure standardised outcomes. Reasons given for loss to follow-up reflect the difficulties associated with researching this population: frequent placement moves, changes in legal status, inadequate or incomplete local authority data management systems, problems with access to data, and one study was affected by a natural catastrophe (Lustig 2008). We do not know the baseline N for the study that did not report loss to follow-up, but the follow-up sample was impressive at 765 (Griffiths *et al.* 2009).

Many of the studies tried to compensate for the lack of a control group by comparing results with official statistics or findings from other studies. While this is of benefit in interpreting the findings, its reliability depends on the quality of the comparison data. Four UK evaluations reported incidences of discrepancy in the local authority data collected for looked after children’s educational outcomes (Berridge *et al.* 2009; Connelly *et al.* 2008; Finn 2008; Harker *et al.* 2004). Because data monitoring is a specific function of the Virtual School, this may have improved in the UK since the time of the evaluations.

**Findings**

*Strategic interventions*

(Table 2: strategic interventions results)

Overall, the strategic interventions did not identify any clear trends resulting from the programmes, but collaboration between different departments improved.

The Virtual School Head pilot survey found that one in three children were more concerned about their placement or school move than their educational progress and the authors expressed concern that this anxiety was not reflected in the adults’ responses. Also of concern was the amount of ‘not sure’ responses among adults, which might indicate that they were unaware of the children’s needs, views and behaviours.

In the Taking Care of Education evaluation emotional well-being and self-esteem scores improved at 18-months follow-up. No other score changes reached statistical significance. Young people placed importance on encouragement from carers and teachers as a trigger to their achievement in school. Children valued interventions that made them feel special, but did not want their looked after status to be highlighted in front of peers. Being singled out for a session was a negative aspect of some initiatives. Some young people said that they did not value support when they had no problems in the first place. The evaluation questioned why the authorities did not support looked after children to attend mainstream activities and concluded that integrating educational support in placements and placement moves is central to helping looked after children succeed in school.

*Pilot of spending targeted money*

(Table 3: pilot of spending targeted money results)

The researchers struggled to complete follow-up, but their dataset is impressive considering the mobile population and number of projects involved. Attainment improved, although we do not know the characteristics of those for whom assessment tests were available, and whether they differed significantly from the other children. The impact on school attendance was small, but positive. These findings were supported by interviews with young people, carers and professionals.

The authors concluded that individualised and flexible approaches were most successful, and that the projects were valued by carers and families, as well as young people. One of the main problems was finding qualified staff. A lot of work went into establishing relationships between projects, social work and education departments and with schools, and projects were concerned about what would happen to these relationships after the end of the pilot period.

*Residential school*

(Table 4: residential school results)

The authors conclude that a completion rate of 76% is promising, considering that an additional 3% left to a lower level of care and other studies have found high school completion rates between 55% and 77% in this population. The placement achieved some permanence, as the average length of stay was 448 days, compared with the young people’s previous history of 338 days per placement.

The interviews at 6 months follow-up found that 28% of young people were attending college, which is comparable to other studies. The flux in housing and employment was less or the same as in other studies of care leavers. A cause for concern was the rate of substance abuse after discharge, which was higher than would have been expected. Overall, the authors conclude that the school achieved outcomes comparable to foster care, which is encouraging since foster care was not an option for these youths.

*Community project*

(Table 5: community project intervention results)

The evaluation found no significant impact from the intervention after the first project year. The most popular and well-run element of the project was mentoring. The vocational component was not so popular, mainly because the young people felt that the jobs offered were too menial. The Saturday tutoring was poorly attended, but tutoring was overall a popular initiative. The project struggled to engage carers.

*Reading encouragement*

(Table 6: reading encouragement interventions results)

The Reading Rich evaluation set out to assess the impact from the intervention, but changed its focus and only a very small component collected baseline and follow-up reading scores. The writers’ residencies in children’s homes were very popular and the interventions appeared to improve carers’ awareness of literacy as an out-of school activity.

The Letterbox Club evaluation had a large sample and found statistically significant effects. Children who scored high on attainment improved the most. The lowest achievers deteriorated between pre and post test. The report does not provide other information on the characteristics of the children.

*Tutoring*

(Table 7: tutoring results)

Many children dropped out of the studies because they moved school and/or placements. Those that did stay until follow-up appeared to improve their skills. The sample sizes for two studies were very small, but the US study comparing three different forms of tutoring included follow-up measures for 88 young people. One of the UK pilots of strategic interventions found that tutoring was very popular (Berridge *et al.* 2009), and it has been found to be an effective intervention for improving reading and maths skills in children aged 5-14 (Ritter *et al.* 2006).

**DISCUSSION**

These findings are indications of promising interventions rather than evidence of effect. The pilot of spending targeted money found encouraging results, especially since these projects appeared to work with hard to engage children. The Letterbox evaluation had encouraging results from a low-intensive, low-intrusive intervention. The residential school is a promising alternative to foster care placement, worth further investigation. From an equity point of view tutoring provides a service which is popular amongst many parents.

Nine of the studies were pilot evaluations of a newly developed programme. This indicates that the development of programmes is still in its early stages, in spite of a long-standing concern for the education of looked after children (Berridge 2007; Jackson 1987) The leap from correlational cohort studies to outcome evaluations of interventions has yet to be made. As such, it might be prudent to consider these studies along Wholey’s (1987) points about how useful evaluations are based on clear definitions of the problem, intervention, and outcomes, a clear logic of testable assumptions linking resources, implementation, outcomes and impact, and are based on an agreement on evaluation priorities (Wholey 1987).

**Definitions of problems, interventions and outcomes**

All of the studies had as an explicit or implicit starting point looked after children’s low achievement in school, based on official statistics or research reports (Department of Health 2002; Jackson 1987). The studies indicate that the interventions were developed in response to the system’s failure to provide adequate education to children in care. With the 2007 Care Matters white paper and the Virtual School, UK looked after children are now more monitored in UK schools than ever before. Future interventions need to consider both attainment support as well as other aspects, such as the effect of emotional trauma resulting from pre-care experiences (Berridge 2007).

Most intervention components were adequately described, but some studies focused more on detailing how the strategic roles and activities were interpreted, than what was intended from the start. Further evaluations would preferably consider which components of an intervention need to be present across all sites, and which elements can be adapted to fit local needs and views.

The studies used a wide variety of measures to track changes in educational outcomes, and it was not always clear what tools were used. In addition to those shown in Figure 2, studies measured behaviour, self-esteem, special educational need status, number of schools attended, and professionals’ attitude. Clearly, there are multiple ways of measuring ‘educational outcomes’.

(Figure 2: Outcome measures in the included studies)

The issue of outcomes is potentially contentious. Education may be seen as primarily a middle class value, and professionals may see attitude and motivation as more achievable than changes in attainment. A young person who gets expelled frequently could change his behaviour in ways that are not caught by the measuring tools used. Also needed is a discussion about realistic expectations for children who have experienced long-term abuse or neglect, as research has found a correlation between literacy and numeracy problems and psychiatric disorders (Ford *et al.* 2007).

**Evaluation focus and priorities**

Many of the study reports did not describe the intervention’s theory for change. When looking at the nature of the interventions, it appears that they were based on one of three explanations:

* Looked after children’s education is not co-ordinated well, and their educational progress is not monitored. This means that support can not be timely, nor targeted to individual needs. The strategic interventions fit here.
* Looked after children often fall behind at school due to placement moves and family problems, which means that they require help to catch up with their peers. Direct support interventions, such as tutoring fit here.
* Looked after children’s home environment does not support their learning, so the home environment needs to be changed to facilitate leisure reading and home work. The reading encouragement interventions and the community support project fit here.

The UK policy evaluations indicate that there might have been a gap between different stakeholders’ understandings or expectations of the programme. None of the studies in this review asked children, carers, or professionals about their desired outcomes, nor involved them in the development of the design. Hawe (1992) has pointed out that words mean different things to different groups, and that the notions of population, intervention or outcome can differ significantly between stakeholders. This particularly plays out in policy evaluations of initiatives commissioned by central government departments, where the intervention is designed centrally, but with scope for local interpretation. The gap between intended outcomes and service delivery and what actually happens becomes evident in the evaluation, which may also contain elements that are at odds with the priorities of the practitioners.

**CONCLUSION**

Looked after children is a group that, statistically, is not reaching government set educational targets and whose achievements fall below those of their peers across the class divide. Enhancing looked after children’s educational outcomes is therefore a UK government priority ([www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/childrenincare](http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/childrenincare)).

This review found that we do not know the effectiveness of programmes that aim to support looked after children in school. Some individual study results are encouraging, and merit further exploration. The studies showed considerable effort by policy makers, practitioners and researchers to develop, deliver and evaluate interventions. However, looked after children themselves were not involved, and there appeared to be a gap in expectations between different stakeholders. There is clearly room for collaboration in this field, in terms of developing clear definitions of the problem and potential solutions, detailed interventions and incorporated programme evaluations from the intervention design stage onwards. While studies have asked looked after children about their school experiences (Broad 2008; Emond 2002; Jackson & Sachdev 2001; Martin & Jackson 2002; McLaughlin *et al.* 2006), we have not found any where young people have informed the development of interventions or evaluations.

This review gives an overview of efforts to measure effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving attendance, literacy and numeracy. Other evaluations have focused on process issues and participant satisfaction (Bryderup 2004; Fletcher-Campbell 2001; Jackson 1989; Pritchard *et al.* 1998). Such evaluations, and those included in this review, contain valuable information to development of support for this group. In light of considerable efforts to provide a coherent service, it is time to identify the most effective ways of providing equal opportunities to one of the most disadvantaged groups of children and young people.

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