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## EDUCATING DIFFICULT ADOLESCENTS: AN EVALUATION OF 'QUALITY PROTECTS'

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### Background

Positive educational experiences are increasingly seen as essential in a rapidly developing society, for a competitive and skills-based economy as well as for reasons of personal fulfillment. In a context of generally improving educational standards and pupil achievements, there are specific groups of children and young people whose lack of adequate progress arouses concern. One such group is children experiencing family breakdown and being looked after by councils ('in care'), mainly in foster and residential homes, as a result of abuse or neglect, family dysfunction, absent parenting or related factors. If the State intervenes due to unsatisfactory parenting, it appears unacceptable if children continue to make inadequate educational progress.

As a response to perceived shortcomings in the care system, government announced the *Quality Protects (QP)* initiative in 1998, with initially £375 million of new resources. Among its other areas of concern for looked after children (e.g. widening placement choice, care leavers, promoting health etc), *QP* also prioritised educational opportunities for looked after children. Consequently, measures of school attendance along with educational attainment became primary performance indicators for children's services.

### Aims and methods

Building on earlier, exploratory research<sup>1</sup>, the current study sought to:

- investigate the development of policy and practice to meet *QP* education objectives
- analyse secondary statistics concerning the educational progress of looked after children
- evaluate the educational and wider experiences of comparable samples of 'difficult' adolescents living in foster homes, children's homes and residential special schools for pupils with 'behavioural, emotional and social difficulties' ('BESD'), and
- analyse the comprehensive costs of care and education services delivered and compare these to outcomes.

To achieve these aims we worked with three local authorities and eight residential schools for children with BESD. The three local authority areas were chosen to provide some variation in geographical location, ethnic population and local government structure. The schools represented a variety of private, local authority and voluntary provision.

<sup>1</sup> Berridge, D., Beecham, J., Brodie, I., Cole, T., Daniels, H., Knapp, M. and MacNeill, V. (2002) *Costs and Consequences of Services for Troubled Adolescents: An Exploratory, Analytic Study*. Report to the Department of Health. Luton: University of Luton.

There were two parts to the study. The first explored councils' responses to the educational objectives of *Quality Protects* through in-depth interviews with senior managers of both care and education services in each of the three local authorities. We also examined, in detail, the publicly available statistics on educational attendance and performance within these authorities.

The main body of the research related to the third and fourth research objectives outlined above and entailed a detailed follow-up of a sample of 150 young people aged between 11 and 15 years. These had been identified through a 'screening process' as presenting difficulties in terms of their behaviour and/or school attendance and each experienced one of three, broadly categorised, types of setting: foster care, children's homes or residential special schools for pupils with BESD.

Interviews were conducted with the professionals / carers working with the young people (their social workers, keyworkers or foster carers) and, where agreement was forthcoming, with the young people themselves. This occurred on two separate occasions, nine months apart. Of the 150, a total of 75 young people agreed to be interviewed by us at Stage 2. We must be careful of the effects of attrition, although the results do not seem to be particularly adversely affected, based on the comparative characteristics of the groups at Stages 1 and 2. The interviews focused on young people's school attendance, their educational and social experiences, as well as views about their education and care. Questions concerning young people's service-use and the costs of provision were incorporated in the follow-up interviews. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were used to explore the data for factors associated with differential outcomes over the nine-month period. The costs of support packages over the nine months period were estimated and the associations explored between costs, needs and outcomes.

## Findings

Initially, a scrutiny of national Key Stage 4 GCSE/GNVQ results confirmed that the looked after group performs academically much more poorly than the general school population. Some improvements have occurred but government targets have been missed. At the local level, we urged caution on the interpretation of these statistics, which can be misleading: groups are often small and populations differ both across authorities and over time. Academic achievements among looked after pupils fluctuated in our three study authorities; yet, encouragingly, there were very few permanent exclusions recorded at all.

Over the duration of the initiative, authorities received very little *QP* grant linked specifically to its education objectives. Other sources of funding were available but, in light of this, we might expect any advances to have been modest. In fact an analysis of local documentation revealed that *QP* was accompanied by progress on inter-professional working and each of the three authorities (and many others) had established forms of dedicated, Education Support Teams for looked after pupils (though sometimes these had begun prior to *QP*). Local managers interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about the impact of *QP* on helping to improve looked after children's education and in moving away from narrow focus on an 'at risk' group.

Looking specifically at our sample of 150 young people, the looked after groups recruited via local authorities had quite different family backgrounds from those encountered at residential BESD schools. The former had experienced noticeably more adversities. Furthermore, professionals thought that almost 9 in every 10 of the residential schools' sample would identify the birth family as their 'home base' compared with only half for the local authority groups. We would expect these differences in upbringing to influence current behaviour and educational achievement. There has been a tendency for commentators to claim that the looked after and residential BESD groups are very similar, or even interchangeable, but our evidence shows otherwise.

In terms of how services responded to these problems, a wide variety of provision was used. There was also much disparity within groups - such as the type of children's homes or dual registered homes/schools. A third of the sample changed placements during our nine-month follow-up period (between Stages 1 and 2); another 6 per cent returned home. This level of movement seems to us high but we need to remind ourselves that these have been selected because they are difficult adolescents and, expressed differently, six in every 10 remained. Half the moves occurred because the placement broke down: either because it was impossible to contain the behaviour or, in view of this, to keep the young person out of trouble or safe. Residents of children's homes at Stage 1 were more likely to experience a move and the residential BESD group was the most stable. But these changes were also linked to the range of behavioural problems indicated at Stage 1, which were far greater for the former group. A quarter of the total sample changed categories of care, mostly from children's homes. Almost half of looked after young people had a change of social worker over the nine months - too many.

We developed our own instrument to 'measure' the quality of care that young people received during the follow-up period - a Quality of Care Index. This concerned the overall 'care package', including wider professional involvement (such as social worker input and inter-professional working) and not just what occurred in the placement / residential school. In response, young people were very positive about the care they had received. Thus, a clear majority - across foster care, children's homes, dual registered facilities and residential BESD schools alike - said that they generally felt safe where they were living and that there was an adult who would stand up for them.

We are aware of the possible limitations of this methodological approach. Therefore, we applied researcher ratings to this data taking into account a wider variety of information. The results were consistent with young people's original views but were less optimistic. There were no differences in the quality of care depending on young people's characteristics but it did vary by placement. Most of the children's homes' (without education) group had been provided with 'good' care but the quality of 'care packages' offered to those living in alternative settings was judged to be better. Yet there was no clear link between quality of care and young people's difficulties *per se* and some homes managed to offer a better care environment, greater security and a wider package of support than others.

Although we judged there to be differences in the quality of care offered depending on where young people lived, this did not automatically translate into the degree of progress they made. We again applied researcher ratings and concluded that the majority of young people showed improvement in a general measure of behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. This occurred irrespective of placement. Indeed, it was complex to identify factors associated with progress. However it was interesting to discover, using young people's overall perceptions, that there was an association between, on the one hand, their judgement of the quality of care they received and, on the other, their satisfaction with schooling and general happiness. In addition, changes in placement were linked with lower levels of general happiness, less satisfaction with the school experience and, to some extent, with friendships also.

On education specifically, as we would expect, our sample had previously posed a range of educational problems. Most had special educational needs, mainly BESD. Good study supports were available to pupils across settings, including adult interest and involvement. These have improved since the introduction of *Quality Protects*. Inter-professional working across Social Services, schools and Education was also

reported to have improved and now be generally good. Education for the children's homes group was particularly problematic although, as we have seen, there was no evidence that educational support for these residents was inferior. Nearly half of the total sample changed educational provision in the nine-month follow-up, although it was usually felt that this benefited pupils. The number of school exclusions was reduced during the follow-up, and nearly half the sample were judged to have made educational progress, with a quarter remaining unchanged: this applied to occupants of foster homes, children's homes, dual registered - and residential schools alike.

The economic component of this study revealed that young people accessed a wide variety of services over the nine-month follow-up. Large majorities visited GPs, dentists and opticians. As many as one in three used hospital A&E services, and four of the costs sample were admitted following overdoses. A third used mental health services. On average (mean), each young person cost £66,300 over the nine months to provide for, some nine-tenths of this going towards placement costs. Dual registered homes (£99,650) and children's home (£86,940) placements were the most expensive, followed by residential BESD schools (£63,880) and foster care (£32,660). If looked after children are placed in residential special schools and require placements in foster care or a children's home during the weekends or school holidays, their educational attendance may improve but it will be at a higher cost to the local authority. There were no particular cost differences in supporting young people for the two of our authorities with sufficient numbers for detailed analysis. Multiple regression analysis revealed that overall costs were related to young people's needs, measured in terms of the number of problems each had at Stage 1. The most difficult young people were placed in the more expensive facilities.

## Conclusions

Thus, a number of positive findings emerged from the study. Most young people interviewed felt that they received good quality care; educational supports were generally good; and most made some social, behavioural and educational progress across placement categories. Yet problems remained: for example, there was movement and instability for young people in the system and too frequent changeover of social workers. There was continuing difficulty with the role and functioning of the children's homes sector.

We discovered that the quality of care offered to young people was related to their general happiness and satisfaction with schooling. This is consistent with the results from other recent research, which also highlight the importance of placement quality and professional skills in influencing outcomes (Sinclair and colleagues 2007<sup>2</sup>; Kilpatrick and colleagues in press<sup>3</sup>). Our results also fit in with the re-emerging interest in the importance of relationships *per se* in social work.

Furthermore, our results are at odds with some of the general criticism of the low educational achievement of looked after children. Official statistics on this subject can be misleading and misunderstood. The wider literature on educational disadvantage is frequently overlooked. Improvements can certainly be made to children's services but children in care as a group tend to perform poorly at school for complex, long-term, structural reasons. Though, as we have seen, most make progress, this is unlikely to eradicate the achievement gap between these pupils and the wider population. Regarding policy development, the educational measures contained in the Children and Young Persons Bill, currently proceeding through Parliament, are more consistent with our findings than the more critical tone reflected in the preceding Green Paper *Care Matters*.

#### *Postscript*

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#### **Additional Information**

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*The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.*

<sup>2</sup> Sinclair, I., Baker, C., Lee, J. and Gibbs, I. (2007) *The Pursuit of Permanence: A Study of the English Child Care System*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

<sup>3</sup> Kilpatrick, R., Berridge, D., Sinclair, R., Larkin, E., Lucas, P., Kelly, B. and Geraghty, T. (in press) *Knowledge Review. Working with Challenging and Disruptive Situations in Residential Child Care: Sharing Effective Practice*. London: SCIE.