Closing the gap Investigating the barriers to educational achievement for looked after children

By tracking the records of individual looked after children from GCSE back through Key Stages 3, 2 and 1, Angela O’Sullivan and Rob Westerman were able to show a steady widening of the gap between their attainment and that of children not in care. Despite weaknesses in local authority data, the evidence is clear that the frequency and timing of placement and school moves play a crucial part in preventing children in care from achieving the levels predicted by their earlier Key Stage grades. The article concludes with practical suggestions for change.

Background

The education of looked after children has acquired increasing importance among researchers and policy makers over the last 15 years (Goddard, 2000). Early analysis of the National Child Development Study data showed that children who had spent time in local authority care were less successful educationally than the rest of the population (Essen et al., 1976). This finding had little impact, but a later paper by Jackson (1987) ignited academic and political interest leading to increasing numbers of reports and studies (Heath et al., 1989; Fletcher-Campbell and Hall, 1990; Jackson, 1994; Borland et al., 1998; Coulling, 2000; Harker et al., 2003). Most recently, this has included the Social Exclusion Unit Report, A Better Education for Children in Care (2003), as well as the study of care leavers going to university (Jackson et al., 2005), and two reports severely critical of the poor educational opportunities provided for children in care: Failed by the System (Barnado’s, 2006) and Handle with Care (Sergeant, 2006).

Partly driven by this interest, there have also been significant changes on the policy front. The Guidance associated with the Children Act 1989 required local authorities to provide both opportunity and support for education and to include it in the care plan (Goddard, 2000). Circular 13/94 issued jointly by the then Department for Education and the Department of Health stressed the need for greater co-operation between local education authorities, schools and social services (Department for Education and Skills/Department of Health, 1994). However, these measures failed to have much impact, and in 1995 a joint inspection by the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI) and the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), finding that low standards were the norm particularly in secondary education (SSI/OFSTED, 1995), set the scene for contemporary debates (Goddard, 2000).

The government’s response was twofold: firstly, targets were set for local authorities, creating both a motivation for change and a body of previously non-existent statistical data; secondly, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and Department of Health (DoH) (2000) issued joint guidance on the education of looked after children (LAC). Although perhaps more an attempt to codify and spread existing best practice rather than introducing radical change, at least this meant that all local authorities were working to the same guidelines. In particular, each school was to have a designated teacher responsible for supporting looked after children and each looked after child was to have a personal education plan (PEP). Care placements were not to be made (except in emergencies) without first securing an educational placement. Section 52 of the Children Act 2004 strengthened this guidance by adding a new duty to promote the educational achievement of looked after children. A critical weakness, however, is that this duty does not extend to schools who are merely ‘expected’ to take a proactive approach to co-operating with and supporting local authorities in discharging this duty [emphasis added]. The duty was introduced too late to affect the children in this study.

Dr Angela O’Sullivan, De Montfort University, is seconded to the Way Ahead Project

Rob Westerman is Assistant Leader, Raising the Attainment of Looked After Children team, Leicester City Children and Young People’s Service

Keywords: looked after children, educational attainment, placement instability, under-achievement, longitudinal study
An important innovation introduced by the present government is the idea of using statistics in a planned way to drive up standards (Simon and Owen, 2006). Local authorities are set two sets of targets by central government: one set relates to the educational attainments, school attendance and permanent exclusion rates of children of compulsory school age who have been looked after for a year or more on 30 September each year; the other relates to educational attainments of those young people aged 16 or over who ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31 March. Authorities are also asked to report on whether those young people previously looked after, whose 19th birthday fell during the same year, are in education, employment or training.

The Leicestershire Aim Higher partnership is a leading national project, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. It seeks to raise aspirations, achievement rates and participation in further and higher education for children in care. Known as 'The Way Ahead Project’, one of its aims was to track the achievement of specific cohorts of looked after children to identify potential causal links with poor achievement in order to inform government policy and front-line practice.

Summary of current research
There is universal agreement among academics and policy makers that looked after children as a group do less well educationally than the rest of the population (Department for Education and Employment/Department of Health, 2000; Goddard 2000; Martin and Jackson, 2002; Evans, 2003; Fletcher-Campbell and Archer, 2003; Social Exclusion Unit, 2003; Jackson et al, 2005). At 30 September 2005 there were 44,700 children who had been looked after continuously for at least a year by English local authorities (Department for Education and Skills, 2006a), mostly (68%) in foster placements. The majority (78%) were of school age and, since 2000, the collection of GCSE results and end of Key Stage results has provided comparative national data that reveal the significant gulf between the levels of achievement of children in care and the rest of the population. In 2005, 86 per cent of all children in the appropriate assessment age group achieved level 2 at Key Stage 1, 80 per cent achieved level 4 at Key Stage 2 and 73 per cent achieved level 5 at Key Stage 3. The comparable respective percentages for children in care were 58 per cent, 44 per cent and 27 per cent (Department for Education and Skills, 2006a). The higher the level of assessment, the bigger the gap becomes.

In 2005, 96 per cent of all school children obtained at least one GCSE or GNVQ, compared to only 60 per cent of looked after children. Even worse, 36 per cent of them did not even sit such an examination. The figure used in school league tables is the percentage obtaining at least five GCSEs (or equivalent), at grades A*-C. Only eleven per cent of looked after children achieved this in 2005 (which is a marginal increase on 9% in 2004), compared with 56 per cent of all children in 2005 and 54 per cent in 2004. Again, the higher the level of achievement the wider the gap (Department for Education and Skills, 2006a).

In this context, it is hardly surprising that by the age of 19, only 19 per cent of care leavers are in further education and only six per cent go on to higher education, compared with 38 per cent of all young people who progress to further or higher education (Department for Education and Skills, 2006b). For many ‘widening participation’ students, even those who do have the support of a stable home life, the barriers can seem insurmountable. For the small number of care leavers who achieve the entry requirements for a university degree, the lack of support and guidance can mean their dream often remains just that (Jackson et al, 2005).

These problems are not new; an earlier study undertaken by researchers in Coventry of children who were in care for two consecutive Key Stage SATs found that the negative influence of being in care on their potential achievement was most noticeable in the shortfall between their Key Stage 4 results, compared with the predictions from those at Key Stage 3 (Evans, 2003; Social Exclusion Unit,
However, the study could not track children in care through their whole school career or care history because at the time there was no statutory requirement to collate such data for looked after children.

The Department of Health declared in 2004 that the data quality of the yearly returns from local authorities was improving year on year. However, Jackson (2001) noted that gaps remained in local authority baseline data and Fletcher-Campbell and Archer (2003), in their cohort study of children looked after in the summer of 2001, described the information on the children’s educational careers as ‘frail’. They commented that the existing data were incomplete, contradictory and not regarded by many social workers as relevant to their work.

Instability in both home and school placements is almost universally cited as contributing to poor educational outcomes for looked after children (Jackson, 1998; Francis, 2000; Jackson and Thomas, 2001; Evans, 2003) and the students least likely to be entered for any GCSE exams are those who experience the most changes of placement (Fletcher-Campbell and Archer, 2003). Moving schools is in itself disruptive to a child’s education but as a significant number of youngsters enter care in their early teens, moves are very likely to disrupt GCSEs. Coursework may be lost or they may transfer to an establishment that does not provide the same curriculum. Losing touch with friends and with supportive teachers who know them also reduces the young people’s chances of success. Again, these findings are not new (e.g. Stein, 1997), but the research reported in this article suggests that change is happening much more slowly than one might have hoped.

**Methodology**

In this study, three cohorts of looked after children from two neighbouring local authorities were tracked back from their GCSE/GNVQ results through Key Stages 3, 2 and 1. Their achievements were analysed in the light of their gender, ethnicity, special educational needs and the number and type of their care placements and schools. The timing of their placement and school moves was also analysed and the GCSE pass rates achieved by other children at the schools has been considered. This novel approach has enabled the researchers to study the same children throughout their educational career, regardless of when they entered the care system.

**Data collection**

Data recording and access problems which have hindered previous researchers were still reflected in the collection of data for this study, in particular the problem of information being held in a variety of places. The starting point for the research was the past three-yearly return made by the local authority on the educational attainment of looked after children of compulsory school age, who had been looked after for a year or more on the 30 September. Year 11 students from each of these cohorts were chosen as research subjects because they had already received their GCSE results.

Unfortunately, this return does not include a full list of care placements, school placements or historical end of Key Stage test results. Data on care placement, gender and ethnicity were sourced from the social services electronic database and were generally of good quality once permission to access the information had been negotiated. Historical end of Key Stage test results, levels of special educational need and school placements were sourced from the education department’s separate electronic database but here there were significant gaps.

The historical nature of the end of Key Stage test results also proved problematic. A child sitting his or her GCSEs in 2005 would have sat their end of Key Stage tests in 2003, 2000 and 1997. They might or might not have been looked after at the time of sitting these tests and in any event local authorities did not have to return these data for looked after children prior to 2001. The education department collects test results for all children but does not separate those who were looked after, nor does it hold results for children who sat the tests in another authority’s school.
Some of the gaps were filled by checking the social services database and asking the education authorities data coordinator to look them up, but again the information was often so old that it wasn’t recorded. The 5A*-C GCSE pass rates for the schools where children sat their exams was available from the DfES website. The combined data were collated, in one authority by the team supporting the education of looked after children and in the other by their management information team. The data were coded for anonymity and passed to the Way Ahead researcher.

Even where data did exist the information was often presented ambiguously. If a student was recorded as ‘Did not sit’ GCSE examinations it is not clear if this means that he or she was not entered or failed to attend. It was also often hard to tell whether the reason why end of Key Stage tests were missing was because the data had not been recorded or because the child had not sat the test. In addition, local authorities are not required to record when a placement move also results in a school move, how long a child is without a school place or what qualifications they achieve post 16. Clearly, standard recording systems and codes are required across education and social services departments.

Even before the data were analysed then, two findings became clear. Information on looked after children’s current educational situation is generally of good quality if not always easily accessible. However, historical information of the sort needed to assess their progress over time and understand the ‘life story’ of their education is still largely missing from local authorities’ records.

The low academic achievement of looked after children compared to the rest of the population is now well documented, but for recommendations to be effective they must be based, as Lord Dearing stated, on ‘evidential research’ (Hansard, 9 February, 2005). The authors’ intentions are to provide such evidential research data but the problems encountered during the collation process have limited a full analysis of the data to date. The ‘missing’ data are still being tracked and when the data collection is complete, a number of correlations will be investigated which may reveal less obvious trends and causal links.

Preliminary findings
One hundred and eighty-seven children were included in this study and their gender balance and ethnic origins are comparable with national statistics for looked after children. In general more males than females are in care at any one time and this was also true of the group studied (55% males/45% females). The majority of children in the group were of white British ethnic origin. Although 17 per cent were recorded as being of other ethnicities, the variety of sub-groups within this number was so large that a separate investigation of each group’s results would not be statistically viable. The ethnicity data have therefore not been analysed but it would seem that there is a clear opportunity here for a wider study in this area, using the same tracking methodology with the significantly larger groups that would be needed.

Nationally, there has been a steady increase in the number of looked after children achieving at least one GCSE, up from 49 per cent in 2000 to 60 per cent in 2005. However, variations between authorities are large and the overall figure remains a long way off both the government’s target of 90 per cent for 2006 and the 96 per cent achieved by the population as a whole in 2005. Progress has also been seen, although at a slower rate, in increasing the proportion of looked after children who passed at least five GCSEs at grades A*-C. This has risen from seven per cent in 2000 to eleven per cent in 2005 (Department for Education and Skills, 2006b). The two authorities in this research study have also seen significant improvements in their LAC achievement in this time period. Data on looked after children’s achievements in post-16 education did not exist.

The Special Educational Needs (SEN) and placement postcode data is still at the collation stage for one authority and has not therefore been analysed yet. Preliminary data show that the number of children with statements of special educational need is comparable with national stats-
tics for looked after children (27%), very much higher than the three per cent of all children with SEN statements (Department for Education and Skills, 2006b). The SEN data in this study will be compared against the number of placements to see if stability is less likely for children with statements. Special educational needs have been cited as correlating with lower educational attainment (Department for Education and Skills, 2006b) and may have an impact on both entry to the care system and to increased instability within it. However, statements are in themselves only a broad brush measure of special educational need; looked after children are particularly vulnerable to falling through the gaps in the assessment system.

A brief overview of the postcode data collated so far has revealed a clustering of foster placements in areas which are frequently the catchment areas for the poorer performing schools. The local authorities involved in the study, aware of this problem, have prioritised looked after children for school places in the better achieving schools. They have invested substantial time in supporting social workers and carers to choose the best school for each child – pre-empting the warmly welcomed recommendations of the government Green Paper, Care Matters (Department for Education and Skills, 2006b).

The data collection problems outlined above highlight the difficulty that care workers, school teachers and educational advisers actually have in seeing the whole picture for a child in care. It is hard to envisage how an effective PEP can be developed when so many pieces of the jigsaw are missing. At the outset of this research project, the aim was to identify students from early SATs results who had the potential to achieve well at Key Stage 4. The intention was to track them through their school and placement moves and identify the impact not only of the number of placement and school moves, but also the timing of these and, if applicable, the impact of entering care on their educational progress. This analysis will still be possible, but there are still a number of missing elements to be found.

Nevertheless, we are able to report on the emerging trends and they do provide the beginnings of the ‘evidential research’ we have been seeking. Placement moves are inevitably disruptive to children and in this study, of those who were moved more than ten times during their time in care, 60 per cent did not sit any GCSE examinations and 34 per cent sat their examinations but achieved no A*-C grades. In fact, of all the children who were moved more than ten times, only six per cent achieved any GCSE passes at grade A*-C and none achieved five passes at grade A*-C.

There are some obvious reasons why instability has such a detrimental impact on achievement. Moving house is one of the most stressful events that adults experience, paralleled with traumatic events like bereavement and divorce. For looked after children placement moves are often not planned and follow the breakdown of their relationship with their carer. The added stress of this, coupled with feelings of guilt and/or rejection make such a move far more stressful than that of an adult moving home. Many of these children have been through other traumatic experiences, which then lead to a life punctuated with insecurity.

Another influence on a child in care is the movement of other children in and out of their placement. This remains a largely unexplored area but offers a further topic for research. Such instability can affect not only the number of GCSEs passed but also the grades achieved. The local authorities included in this study are aware of instability as a barrier to educational achievement and the authors are pleased to report that in both authorities the average number of placements per child in their care is steadily declining. This reflects positive actions that have been initiated to meet government targets.

The number of placement moves needs to be considered along with an analysis of the timing of those moves and this is the direction that the further analysis of this study will take. Ten placement moves may occur in the form of one every year of a child’s school life, or all ten in the year before they sit their GCSEs. Clearly, moves at crucial times, such as before assessment points, are likely to influence measured achievement markedly, but we
hope to be able to identify the other likely pivot points in a child’s life in care when moves may be more damaging. These may be different for girls and boys.

The data presented in Care Matters (Department for Education and Skills, 2006b) clearly shows the negative correlation between the number of placement moves in Years 10 and 11 and achievement; we hope to be able to expand on these findings.

Moving placement may also mean a change of school, although as local authorities are not required to report on this, any conclusions must be drawn from correlating the dates of such moves. As GCSEs are two-year courses, moving school in Years 10 or 11 can potentially mean that children are unable to complete their studies in some subjects as they may not be on the new school’s curriculum. Likewise, there could be problems with coursework completion and modules may be taught in a different order at the new establishment. All these factors add to the likelihood of the student not being entered for the examination. In this study, approximately 50 children moved schools in Year 10 or 11; half of them did not sit any GCSE examinations and those who did might well have achieved better grades if they had not been moved at this crucial time. When all the retrospective data are tracked and collated it will be possible to predict, from their Key Stage SATs results, how much these moves and other synergistic factors have prevented them from achieving their potential.

When interpreting these data we must not lose sight of the fact that some school moves can be advantageous to the child, especially if they move to a better achieving school, something the government has recognised with a key recommendation from the recent Care Matters:

... giving local authorities the power to direct schools to admit children in care even when the school is already full – backed up by an expectation on local authorities to place children in care in the best schools.

Further analysis of the correlation between looked after children’s GCSE attainment and the overall achievement of the school where they sat their GCSE exams should provide additional supporting evidence.

Conclusions
This research study was intended to identify the barriers to educational achievement for looked after children. The data obtained from the two authorities have been combined to obtain statistically viable numbers; but it must be recognised that the authorities are in themselves very different and have different constraints upon them. Nevertheless, both authorities involved in the research are to be commended for the way in which they have co-operated, shared information and worked to bridge the information gap between social services and the education authorities.

The data collection for this research has highlighted the difficulties that remain in accessing information on looked after children’s educational careers. Some of the barriers to information gathering are created by the way local authorities are required to report on looked after children’s educational outcomes and, as such, are likely to be a national problem. Our experience also leads us to expect that each local authority area may have its own local practices which may or may not be helpful to research of this kind. However, if the barriers were broken down, the information would be readily available to allow projects like this one to compare regional variations. It would also ensure that children in care, who are relocated to different regions, will be supported by professionals who have access to their educational and care history.

From a practical point of view, it would seem safe to say that what is hard for researchers to locate will be equally, if not more so, for social workers, carers and teachers. If the methods of tracking and analysing the educational ‘life history’ of looked after children are to be embedded in national practice, the authors would like to make the following preliminary recommendations:
**For government**
- Require local authorities to report on the number of placement moves that are made without first securing a school place.
- Require local authorities to report on the number of looked after children who are without a school place for more than 20 days.
- Set more meaningful targets for care leavers’ educational attainment post 16. These should include the number achieving further educational qualifications and the number going on to university rather than simply the current number in education, training or employment.

**For local authorities**
- Social workers, designated teachers and educational authorities should have access to a shared and updated database.
- Where this is not possible in the short term, education and social services departments which have separate databases should have in place arrangements to allow social workers to access educational data, both current and historical, relating to looked after children on their caseload.
- Local authorities should put in place written agreements as to who stores what educational data and the coding system to be used.

**For social workers and foster carers**
- Knowing the child’s previous end of Key Stage test results and how to interpret them is an essential part of the personal education planning process.
- Potential achievement must be monitored against actual end of Key Stage test results and extra support requested for children who seem not to be achieving their full potential.
- Choosing the right school for each child is crucial. Looked after children are more likely to achieve in a school where achievement is the norm rather than the exception. Social workers and carers should know what the GCSE pass rates of their local schools are. Choosing a school is a major decision and should be part of the care plan.
- Placement and school moves should be minimised, particularly in Years 10 and 11.
- Children with frequent placement moves are likely to need significant help to catch up in school. This support may have to be provided outside of school hours by extra tutoring or other out-of-school learning and should be paid for by children and young people’s services rather than relying on in-school provision. Care plans should automatically consider this if the child has been moved frequently.
- The same should apply to children who change schools in Years 10 or 11.

If these recommendations are implemented, looked after children will have a much better chance of achieving their potential. It is never going to be easy to close the achievement gap; by definition, looked after children have difficult backgrounds and often behavioural problems and other educational difficulties before they even enter the care system. However, these factors need not be compounded by the care system itself. Professionals implementing these recommendations will still meet many challenges but we must not lose sight of the fact that looked after children can and do achieve: some of the results from these cohorts are A*s. If these children are carefully tracked and supported throughout their education, their potential will be recognised and fulfilled and, it is hoped, they will have a greater chance in life.

**References**
Barnardo’s, *Failed by the System*, Ilford: Barnardo’s, 2006
Department for Education and Employment and Department of Health, *Education of Children in...*


Department for Education and Skills, Outcome Indicators for Looked After Children to Year ending September 30, 2005, London: DfES, 2006a

Department for Education and Skills, Care Matters: Transforming the lives of young people and children in care, London: DfES, 2006b


Department of Health, Children Looked After by Local Authorities – Year ending 31 March 2003, Government Statistical Service, 2004

Essen J, Lambert L and Head J, ‘School attainment of children who have been in care’, Child Care, Health and Development 2, pp 339–51, 1976


Fletcher-Campbell F and Archer T, The Achievement at Key Stage Four of Young People in Public Care, Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research, 2003


Hansard, 9 February 2005, Column 849


Jackson S, The Education of Children in Care, Bristol: Bristol Papers in Applied Social Studies No 1, 1987


Jackson S, High Achievers: A study of young people who have been in residential or foster care, Final report to the Leverhulme Trust, Swansea: University of Wales, 1998


Jackson S, Ajayi S and Ougley M, Going to University from Care, Final report of the By Degrees project, London: Institute of Education, 2005


Sergeant H, Handle with Care: An investigation into the care system, London: Centre for Young Policy Studies, 2006


Stein M, What Works in Leaving Care?, Ilford: Barnardo’s, 1997


Social Exclusion Unit, A Better Education for Children in Care, London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003

© Angela O’Sullivan and Rob Westerman 2007