

What factors impact
the educational
outcomes of children
in foster care?



Introduction

According to the Department for Education, as at 31 March 2018, majority of looked after children that is, 55, 200 in the UK were accommodated in foster placements. This represented 73% of all looked after children, with a marked increase in 2017 figures which was 53, 010 children (DfE, 2018). With seventy-three per cent of these children and young people living in foster placements, children who have been in care or presently in care were reported as one of the lowest performing groups in terms of educational attainment (O'Higgins et al, 2015).

Concerns relating to the educational outcomes of looked after children have been in public domain since the 1970s (Essen et al, 1976), but it was only via the Children Act 2004 that specific responsibility were given to local authorities pertaining to the promotion of educational achievement. Foster care is reported as the most far reaching interventions targeted at children who became looked after due to abuse or neglect by their parents or care givers or via their own presentation of anti -social behaviour (Pears et al, 2015). Whilst noting a massive differential between the attainment of looked after children and their peers. the Department for Education and Skills, (2010) reported educational deficiency as the root of most social problems in the society.

The research topic on the link between attendance of different schools and the educational outcomes of fostered children, was presented in Part A of this dissertation. This included an elaboration on the methodology employed in identifying relevant literature to address the research question: To what

extent do fostered children going to different schools impact their educational outcomes? Following tutor feedback, the topic has been revised to: What factors impact the educational outcomes of children in foster care?

As previously highlighted in Part A, the research topic was chosen as fostering/looked after children (LAC) is the specific area of social work practice that I intend to pursue following my social work degree. I was equally drawn to the topic having attended a lecture in the University during which the underwhelming educational attainment of looked after children was elaborated with their outcomes compared with other children living with their birth parents. This dissertation will employ critical review of existing literature/research in exploring factors identified as impacting on the education of Looked After Children (LAC)/fostered children while also considering the implications of these findings for social work practice. Available research have identified that a range of factors, including deprivation, family breakdown, special educational need status and pre-care traumatic and other experiences, may independently rationalise the educational disadvantage of looked after children (Welbourne & Leeson, 2012; Sebba et al, 2015).

This dissertation/literature review will explore available relevant research to answer the following broad questions;

What does research say about the educational outcomes of LAC? What impact do pre-care experiences with birth families have on educational outcomes of looked after children? Is there any evidence available that links placement instability, frequent school/placement changes, low expectations

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and Statements of special educational needs (SEND), with poor educational attainment for LAC?

How does available research explain the gap in educational attainment for fostered or looked after children compared to other children and what factors have been identified as positive influences to educational attainment for fostered children?

To what extent is the voice of the looked-after child or young person represented in available research on their educational attainment?

Given the paucity of research specifically focused on children in foster care, the terms “ foster care” and “ looked after children” will be used interchangeably within this dissertation whilst reviewing selected literature.

There are currently various perspectives attempting to justify the level of educational attainment of Looked-after Children. One perspective historically situates pre-care experiences of children as the major influence on educational achievement (Heath et al, 1989). Another perspective posits through evidence, that the poor educational achievement of looked after children is more related to weaknesses within the care system (Jackson, 2013). This study by Jackson (2013) identified some factors as main precursors of the educational under achievement of looked after children. These include placement instability, poor school attendance, lack of adequate support and encouragement within placement and lack of adequate support with emotional, mental and physical health and well-being. These factors appear to place the responsibility for poor educational performance with the care system even as Honey et al, (2011) informs that “
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the foster care system must be fully accountable for what happens to young people in its custody”, while noting that it is important to hold the care system accountable for providing young people with the requisite opportunities to succeed.

Taking cognisance of identified research findings relating to factors impacting the education attainment of looked after children, this dissertation will examine relevant government guidance and policies with a view to ascertaining whether the identified factors have been addressed sufficiently while noting areas that are outstanding.

For instance, one government policy directed towards raising the profile of education and improving attainment in England, is the establishment of a ‘virtual school’ headteacher (VSH) to spearhead the education of looked after children as stipulated in the Children and Families Act 2014. With a clear directive to work with partners and other agencies to ensure that educational needs of looked after children are better met, virtual schools (VS) are expected to offer direct and strategic support that engenders positive educational outcomes for looked after children (Drew and Bannerjee, 2018).

Methodology

Following searches conducted to answer the research question, twenty peer-reviewed articles were identified. As discussed in part A, these were compiled following a rigorous search (Carey, 2009) which involved gleaning the titles, then abstracts and sometimes, a quick perusal through the article to ensure relevancy. However, in part B, upon further in-depth perusal of the twenty articles, five were eliminated because they were literature reviews, <https://assignbuster.com/what-factors-impact-the-educational-outcomes-of-children-in-foster-care/>

and as mentioned in part A, it is not acceptable to use articles that one have not read in their original form as it would not be possible to analyse and critique as that also creates the risk of misrepresenting the material (Aveyard, 2014). Using literature reviews also increases the risk of answering the research question prior to a consideration of all available literature. In order to ensure a comprehensive ' hierarchy of evidence' (Aveyard, 2014 p. 65), the remaining articles were ranked according to the methodology used during their compilation and this led to a further elimination of three articles without a methodology section, which would have made it difficult to ascertain the legitimacy of their studies. In the process, two other articles were found not relevant to the research question which eventually resulted in ten articles being brought forward for review as part of this dissertation.

Given the exploratory nature of the research question, which seeks to unearth factors that impact on educational outcomes of fostered children, it was deemed best answered using qualitative research, a language-based approach of data collection, rather than quantitative research, which is mostly concerned with numbers (Aveyard, 2014), while triangulation, which entails using " more than one method or source of data" to study a social phenomenon was equally considered (Bryman, 2012 p. 717). Of the ten research articles selected (Appendix), eight were found to have employed a qualitative approach, one was qualitative while another one was based on mixed methods approach, where the researcher employed the qualitative approach to complement the findings of the quantitative study.

During the process of familiarising with the content of the literature, the research papers were meticulously studied to ascertain their relevance in <https://assignbuster.com/what-factors-impact-the-educational-outcomes-of-children-in-foster-care/>

answering the research question. This also entails noting down the main topic of the study and findings of the different articles. To enable an understanding of the data collection methods used, adequate time was devoted to studying different research approaches, especially the qualitative research method.

Various critical appraisal tools such as Locke et al., 2004; Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP), 2018; and Aveyard, 2014) (Appendix) were used to enable an assessment of the quality of each article for relevance, strength and limitation in addressing the research question. Following a critical analysis of each article, the findings were then presented as a narrative of characteristics and findings towards identifying any interconnection between the articles (Aveyard, 2014).

In order to understand the findings, different themes were identified to explore how different factors influence the educational outcomes of fostered children. The critical analysis enabled a comparison, contextualisation and integrated interpretation of findings which were “ more substantive than the results of individual articles” Aveyard, 2014).

In order to identify the interconnection between different themes in the articles, similar ideas were marked out and highlighted, for example, impact of pre-care experience of LAC/fostered children was marked, later revealing a theme of trauma and maltreatment. The data was then further broken down into parts and given names by coding (Bryman, 2012), while ensuring that each fitted accurately in the right category. With more themes emerging, a table was created to tabulate the emerging themes and these

were matched to the research articles (appendix). The table was used to visualise the pattern of the results, thereby assisting in the “ continuous comparative analysis” of the texts as some themes were identified in some articles and not in others (Aveyard, 2014).

As the literature review focus became more refined, a snowball technique was used to identify other relevant articles. This involved following up references from the articles found through initial database searches; references were obtained while further relevant references were also identified from the text. Government legislation and guidance were perused using the Department for Education website. In total about 24 articles from a range of journals were identified and examined to determine their relevance to the research question. The initial searches were carried out in early July 2019, with additional database searches conducted up until the time of submission of this dissertation.

Analysis

Many research studies have identified factors that may cause looked after children to fall behind in their education: pre-care trauma/lived experiences, instability including changes of school, placement or support workers, emotional issues, poor attendance or exclusion from school as well as having statement of special educational needs and disability (SEND).

Theme 1 - Impact of pre-care trauma and lived experience

Sutcliffe, Gardiner & Melhuish (2017) in their study posited that the educational disadvantage of LAC can be attributed mainly to the difficulties

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that preceded the children being looked after rather than to the effects of government care. The study also highlighted group trajectory analysis (GTA) as a flexible, effective method for analysing the educational progress of looked-after children, stating that GTA allows factors associated with a late decline or improvement in educational progress to be identified. The study however provides evidence that early entry into care can reduce the risk of poor educational outcomes concluding that being looked after at an early stage and for a longer time is generally beneficial to children's educational progress.

Early research appear to infer that poor school performance is attributable to the extremely disadvantaged families from which most looked after children originate concluding that majority have experienced neglect or abuse, or both before coming into care (Heath et al, 1989). Bazalgette et al. (2015) and Berridge (2012) agree that pre-care experience certainly play a part in poor educational attainment; they however laid equal blame on failure to address the aftermath of such experiences amongst other issues like the impact of separation when children are removed from their families, etc.

Berry et al, (2016) also agree that chaotic home environments during the early years could lead to poorer cognitive and social outcomes for looked after children especially at age five. This, according to the study can partly be explained by the effects of parent's abilities to respond to children's needs within such an environment, with research revealing children growing up in chaotic environments as having the tendency to experience fewer and lower quality interactions with their carers within the home (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2012). Such families have been identified as having minimal
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involvement in their children's education even as positive parenting is linked with higher social and academic competence (Byford, Kuh & Richards, 2012).

Whilst available evidence appears to indicate that being in care is detrimental to educational outcomes, some research studies however infer that children do not appear to benefit academically from being in care. That notwithstanding, at least two studies found that LAC were performing better than their peers, after several disadvantages had been considered (Berger et al., 2015; McClung & Gayle, 2010.). The studies examining the link between being looked after and educational outcomes concluded that pre-care experiences are crucial in the explanation of the educational difficulties of looked after children (O'Higgins, Sebba & Luke, 2015). An analysis of the studies however indicate that this impact is different for children becoming looked after at different ages. This is because children entering care at different ages are likely to have different experiences, for example while most infants enter care because of abuse or neglect, most teenagers go into care because they have behavioural problems or have experienced family breakdown. Sebba et al. (2015) and McClung and Gayle (2010) found that children who entered care as teenagers had poorer educational outcomes and progress than those who entered when they were younger while it was identified that teenage entrants into care fared better as they stay longer. Data from the Department for Education in England also appear to identify a positive link between length of time in care and the number of qualifications obtained at age 16 (DfE, 2014). Whilst this appear to reflect a positive effect of being looked after in England, at least two other studies (Berger et al., 2015; Sebba et al., 2015) using longitudinal designs suggested that being

looked after for a shorter period is not detrimental to educational outcomes, as postulated by the DfE data highlighted above.

Theme 2 – Placement/school instability

In addition to the aforementioned factors, the disruption of being removed from birth parents and instability of frequent placement moves have been identified another factor that may compound developmental risks for looked after children (O’Higgins et al, 2015). A study by Jackson and McParlin (2005) highlighted that government, for the first time through The Quality Protects programme (Department of Health, 1998) set targets for educational outcomes, placement stability and reducing time out of school in order to bridge the care/education divide. However, the impact of the government programme appears far-fetched as most reviewed literature that identified frequent placement transitions portend disruption to attachment relationships for LAC (Grigg, 2012). Moves between foster care placements was also linked to moves in-between schools, while school mobility is identified as another contributory factor to poorer outcomes (O’Higgins et al., 2015; Pears et al., 2015) both in terms of educational progress and difficulties forming positive and trusting relationships with teachers and peers (Pears et al., 2015). Wellbourne & Leeson (2012) suggested that school and placement changes are factors impeding looked after children’s educational attainment as placement changes most times induce school changes which links to poor educational outcomes. According to the study, the lower the frequency of changes, the better the outcomes for looked after children as frequent changes generally indicate a young person in distress.

Sebba et al, (2015) reported that for each additional placement change after <https://assignbuster.com/what-factors-impact-the-educational-outcomes-of-children-in-foster-care/>

age 11, looked after children achieve one-third of a grade less at GCSE while looked after children who changed school in Years 10 or 11 scored over five grades less than their peers that didn't experience any change. The same study identified that every 5% of possible school sessions missed as a result of unauthorised school absences, looked after children scored over two grades less at GCSE, while for every school day missed due to fixed-term exclusions, looked after children scored one-sixth of a grade less at GCSE. Sebba et al. (2015) conducted a review of attainment of looked after children in different placement settings concluding that LAC in non-mainstream schools (including special schools, but also young people in pupil referral units and alternative provision) present lower attainment at age 16 than their LAC counterparts in mainstream schools. Overall, these studies indicate that looked after children's experiences in schools are complex and multifaceted. Altogether, there appear to be far fewer studies on the role of schools, teachers and children's school life experiences, compared to those relating to the children's care histories. There may be need for further research that will enable a clearer picture of the role and impact of schools on the educational attainment of looked after children.

Some of the studies however agree that additional educational input, tailored to the needs of each child, was crucial in compensating for the educational laxity experienced by many looked after children.

Theme 3 - Impact of "SEND" status of looked after children

According to the Education Act, 1996, a child has special educational needs (also known as SEN) if he/she requires special educational care based on his

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learning difficulty. The introduction of the Equality Act 2010 directs all schools in U. K to make suitable adjustments to enable students with disabilities to engage fully in educational activities in schools. The Act also places responsibility on schools instructing that students with disabilities should be treated at par with non-disabled children. In consonance with the Equality Act, Hills (2013) posits that “ children with disabilities are to be enabled adequate adjustments in respect to admission facilities or in receipt of education and associated services, to stop them from being placed at a considerable disadvantage”. Available research indicates that a higher proportion of looked after children identified need special education (Berridge, 2012) even as Sebba et al (2015) affirmed that looked after children are 6 to 8 times more likely to have special educational needs. Berridge (2012) highlighted a higher proportion of children in care (28%) as having diagnoses of special needs compared to the wider school population (3%) (Berridge, 2012: 7). Figures from the Department of Education state that, “ 73 per cent of school age children looked after continuously for 12 months have some form of special educational needs” (DfE, 2010). Sebba et al. (2015) stated that diagnoses like autistic spectrum disorder, moderate learning difficulties and severe or multiple learning difficulties often predict lower outcomes for looked after children at age 16. This according to the study contrasts with other types of special educational needs, including physical disabilities and speech, language and communication difficulties with minimal adverse consequences for outcomes. It should be noted that some of the studies did not define special educational needs and whether children with special needs were subjected to similar tests and assessments as their peers. The findings however overwhelmingly indicate special

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educational needs as an impediment for looked after children's outcomes while evidence abound that looked after children are more at risk from this than other children in the general population (Sebba et al., 2015).

Special educational needs and disability (SEND) also have a huge effect on attainment (DfE 2017) and are much more common for LAC (just over 57% are identified as having such needs) than for the total population with SEND (just over 14%) (DfE 2017). As emphasised by Berridge (2012), the behavioural difficulties and complex learning challenges experienced by LAC have been inadequately addressed, with many of the individuals assigned statements of Special Educational Needs (SEND) being misunderstood, which has routinely led to the insufficient provision of appropriate support and exacerbation of educational problems. Sebba et al, 2015 informs that young people who were in special schools (SEND) at age 16 scored over 14 grades lower in their GCSEs compared to those with the same characteristics who were in mainstream schools. A study by Driscoll, (2013) indicated social, emotional and mental health as crucial factors to educational attainment. The study stated that in primary schools up to age 11, about 41% of children having a 'statement' or Education and Health Care Plan (EHC) in England have these factors as their primary need compared to just over 13% with moderate learning disabilities and just under 20% with speech, language and communication needs (DfE 2016).

Theme 4 - Views of Looked after children and role of teachers/carers

An additional perspective was that looked after children did not want to be seen different to their peers and to avoid this, they may require additional

support outside of the school, including during the evenings, weekends or and during school holidays (O'Higgins et al, 2015). This study posits that looked after children, wanted to 'fit in' and not be different in any way. Accordingly, looked after children who are ascribed the label of 'in care' by the social and educational system remain at risk of being stigmatised and seen as a failure. There has also been a comprehensive documentation of LAC encountering unsupportive professional or carer practices that further accentuate the feeling of difference thereby highlighting their care status and compromising expectations for attainment (McLeod, 2010). To address this anxiety amongst looked after children, Berridge (2012) has called for a debate to be held "in the UK on the role and relative importance of carers' educational histories, motivation and confidence" (p. 1175).

According to the study, a lack of educational expectations from carers negatively affects looked after children's attainment. Some children have also identified their carers as being relatively disinterested in their schooling. This disinterest extends to not caring whether they attend school or truant, indifference to their progress and school reports, not providing support with homework, and not attending school events.

A research by Bernedo et al. (2012) reported concerns about the level of relevant training available to teachers to address the needs of LAC. In same vein, Ferguson & Wolkow (2012) also reported concerns amongst LAC that teachers didn't understand their circumstances and had minimal insight into the challenges associated with being looked after. As part of the 'In Care, In School' project, Parker & Gorman (2013) also highlighted the gulf in

understanding between social care and schools, stating that this presents a <https://assignbuster.com/what-factors-impact-the-educational-outcomes-of-children-in-foster-care/>

major problem and that, accessing in-depth knowledge of the negative effects of rejection, abuse and neglect will be beneficial to the LAC. In order to support LAC, teachers may not require details of a child's history of abuse, but rather need knowledge around the link between dysfunctional early relationships and educational achievement. It is however positive that looked after children have reported in other studies that teachers provide the most significant educational support for them while teachers also concurred that they require more training effectively provide this support (Sebba et al, 2015).

Jackson (2013) highlighted that a looked after children may present more behavioural difficulties than their peers, she however believes it is equally likely that they are being unfairly targeted by school systems unprepared for their circumstances. Jackson (2013) argues that for mainstream schools to be LAC focused, the education system must change, rather than the emphasis being on the 'looked-after' child. As such, Jackson urges the Government to greatly increase the quality of teacher training offered regarding LAC pupils, with this applicable to all teachers, and not just specialists. Research by Honey et al. (2011) also identified this gap whilst clamouring for educational psychologists to work with schools in delivering such training as according to the report, educational psychologists are better placed to explain how the pre-care and in-care experience potentially impact on LAC learning and behaviour. Two of the studies reviewed have identified the need for social workers, schools and carers to work together in partnership towards good educational outcomes for looked after children (Fostering Network, 2006; Berridge, 2012; Welbourne & Leeson, 2012). A

recent government initiative to address this has been the introduction of personal education plans (PEP) for every child in care (DfE, 2014) with requirements for local authorities to prioritise looked after children for places in outstanding schools. A personal education plan is positioned to ensure: access to services and support; contributes to stability, minimises disruption and broken schooling; signals and special needs; establishes clear goals and acts as a record of progress and achievement (DfE, 2014). Research by Drew & Banerjee (2019) recognised a growing evidence base around education-based initiatives, like virtual school heads (VSHs), personal education plans (PEPs) and designated teachers as impacting positively on the experiences of looked after children.

The position of virtual school head (VSH) for LAC is typically held by a senior local authority employee and he/she is responsible for managing a coordinated system of support for looked after children with the aim of improving their educational attainment (Berridge, 2012). Questions have however arisen regarding the possibility of VSHs managing two roles effectively especially given the dwindling budgets of local authorities which may exert pressure on the VSHs (Welbourne & Leeson, 2012). The role of the VSH is to monitor looked after children's " educational progress and access to educational provision as if they were attending a single school". As Berridge (2012) puts it: " The Virtual School, is not envisaged as a teaching institution, but a model to oversee progress and support as well as to hold to account those who provide services". (2012, p. 33). The pilot evaluation of the Virtual School initiative positively identified the role of VSH as a valuable one that should help improve children's educational outcomes (p. 36).

Bazalgette et al, (2015) also concludes that the provision of a designated teacher via VSH can potentially provide looked after children with a reliable adult professional positioned to offer some continuity, stability and “advise and support them in their educational career” (Bazalgette et al, 2015). Such support according to Berridge (2012) include a dedicated phone line to support one-to-one tutoring and homework, which have been found to be effective in the pilot of virtual schools. Driscoll (2011) was however picked out one key element to the virtual schools’ work was the raising of awareness of the needs of CLA so that they could be better supported within educational settings.

Conclusion

This review has considered the main issues affecting low educational attainment of children in care. While a lot of research has been undertaken on this issue particularly so in recent years, there is still a need for solid and successful evidence-based recommendations.

The key to improving educational outcomes for children in care overall is investment; in education, as an essential resource for improving the life outcomes of children who have had a less than perfect start in life; in social workers and carers, by educating them in the importance of education and ensuring that it informs their work with children; in improved systems that have the appropriate and necessary services and supports available: be it CAMHS, counselling, special education services, designated teachers and virtual school heads.

Local Authorities have a responsibility to secure a suitable care placement for looked after children in their area. This means that, where possible, the Local Authority is expected to arrange a care placement which enables the child to continue in their existing educational placement. This is contained in S. 10 of the Care planning, placement and case review regulations.

It is clear from the evidence presented, that for LAC to stand any chance of succeeding in the mainstream school environment, the nurture and support of caring teaching staff is essential. Training can play an important role in helping staff to understand the needs of LAC and look beyond the presenting, sometimes difficult, behaviour. This intervention increases the chances of a long-term, stable, successful school experience.

Recommendations

It will be recommended that foster home placements should be selected based on their ability to support and promote educational achievement as well as emotional wellbeing of fostered children while placement moves during exam years should be avoided other than in exceptional circumstances.

All children who come into care should have a detailed educational and psychological assessment as soon as possible, in order to mitigate the effect of pre-care traumatic lived experiences, while negative labels and stigma should be avoided in the best interests of looked after children.

Appendix 1 - Reviewed Literatures

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1. Educational Progress of Looked-After Children in England: A Study Using Group Trajectory Analysis Published online August 4, 2017; Pediatrics 2017; 140; Alastair G. Sutcliffe, Julian Gardiner and Edward Melhuish.
2. Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., O'Higgins A., (2015). The educational progress of looked after children in England: linking care and education data. Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, University of Oxford and University of Bristol.
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4. Bazalgette, L., Rahilly, T. and Trevelyan, G. (2015) Achieving emotional wellbeing for looked after children: a whole system approach. London: NSPCC.
5. Drew, Helen and Banerjee, Robin (2019) Supporting the education and wellbeing of children looked-after: what is the role of the virtual school? European Journal of Psychology of Education, 34 (1). pp. 101-121. ISSN 0256-2928
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7. Berger, L. M., Cancian, M., Han, E., Noyes, J. & Rios-Salas, V. (2015) Children's academic attainment and foster care. Pediatrics, 35(1).

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13. //Educating young people in care: What have we learned? Berridge, David, *Children and Youth Services Review*, June 2012, Vol. 34(6), pp. 1171-1175.