

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

Children in Scotland is pleased to submit evidence to the Education and Culture Committee. We agree that the educational attainment of looked after children is an issue of long-standing concern. Some of the earliest research on this issue is now over twenty years old. Notable among these is Sonia Jackson's 1987 study 'The Education of Children in Care'¹, which was seminal in drawing the attention of service providers and decision-makers to the huge proportion of care leavers who had no educational qualifications and to how markedly their educational experience differed from that of the general population.

The Committee is right to be concerned about the lack of an acceptable level of change in educational outcomes since devolution in 1999. It is even more concerning that the position Professor Jackson found in 1987 has not improved significantly, despite substantial investment on the part of national government and local authorities. It is also worrying that poor educational attainment is highly correlated with other kinds of disadvantage in adult life – unemployment, homelessness, poverty, mental and physical health problems, early parenthood and involvement in crime. *We encourage the Committee to examine carefully and to gather evidence about **why** the educational attainment of looked after children has not improved, despite good intentions and the range of past interventions aimed at improving outcomes.* Understanding this history should diminish the chances of repeating it once again.

To understand why outcomes are (and have remained) so bad, and why so many looked after children fail to engage effectively with the process of learning, it may be good to focus on the key factors that help children learn – and those that will predictably undermine their prospects of good educational attainment. Happily, much more is now known these key factors, i.e. about how and when children learn, than when Professor Jackson first undertook her research.

There is now a powerful and indisputable body of evidence showing that a child's brain develops more rapidly in the pre-birth to three period than at any later stage of life. What happens – or fails to happen – during pregnancy and infancy has an impact for better or worse that is more powerful and enduring than previously has been recognised. In keeping with current emphasis on preventative spending, Children in Scotland encourages the Committee to accord full consideration to what can be done *before* looked after children reach school age that will improve their later educational attainment.

The cognitive development of children who experience a nurturing and stimulating home learning environment during this time will very quickly start to outstrip those who do not. 'Growing Up in Scotland'², a major longitudinal study funded by the Scottish Government, has found that significant differences in cognitive ability had already emerged by the age of three, and, more concerning, had increased by age five. Those children in the lowest ability group were many times more likely to be in families that were also disadvantaged by poverty, low parental educational attainment, poor housing and lifestyle choices that were more likely to result in poor health, crime and violence – i.e., the very families from which most looked after children originate.

The roots of educational failure for children who become looked after by the local authority therefore usually lies in what has happened to them long before they came to social workers' attention. The home learning environment experienced by many of them at this critical life stage does not prepare them well for embarking on their educational journey. What 'Growing Up in Scotland', worryingly, shows, is that while nursery education may mitigate the full impact of adverse early experience, the gap between the most advantaged and the least advantaged children grows during this time. Recent research by Professor Kathy Sylva³ indicates that, by the end of primary school, the gap has become even wider.

It is vitally important to recognise that this situation is neither inherited nor inevitable. As research confirms, if children have the right kinds of experience in early life, then they will be well equipped to thrive when they enter formal education. If they do not, then they are very unlikely to 'make up for lost time' later. No universal service that supports parenting, contributes to alleviating poverty and enhances children's development exists for under-threes in Scotland. The gap between the least and the most advantaged thus not only exists but, in the absence of services to overcome it, grows.

It is also essential to understand that providing children with the right kind of early experience is "the single most important factor influencing a child's intellectual and social development, whatever the material status of their family"⁴. The style of parenting, the kind of care, the quality of attachment and the provision of a stimulating learning environment will have far more influence than how well-off, or, indeed, well-educated, families are. Virtually without exception, children who become looked after have not had good early experiences. The inadequacy of these important early inputs is often compounded by ongoing trauma, stress, neglect and abuse. It is hardly surprising that in these circumstances these children are overtaken educationally by their more advantaged peers.

The educational attainment of looked after children is too often measured primarily (if not solely) in terms of qualifications obtained at the end of formal schooling. Even when children have been well known to be at risk of, or have actually started, falling behind educationally or failing to cope with the school environment, services to address this deficit are often delivered too late, are patchy and inconsistent and fail to tackle the problems in a holistic way. The trigger for intervention more often seems to reflect when behaviour or performance becomes difficult for teachers to manage, rather when children start to struggle.

The Scottish Government's own evaluation of a diverse range of pilot projects delivered by eighteen local authorities⁵ shows that a wide range of intervention methods was used. Interestingly, despite the overwhelming evidence of the crucial role of early learning, 225 (37%) of the 614 children who received support from these projects were over fifteen and only 69 under eight (11%). None were under five. This does not in any way reflect the age profile of the looked after population. Recent figures show 37% are under five, 30% of primary school age and 32% of secondary school age⁶. Indeed, over the last ten years, the proportion of looked after children in the 12 – 16 age group has steadily declined while that of under fives has just as steadily risen. Despite this, most of the effort and investment intended to improve educational outcomes has been, and continues to be, focused on the secondary school age group.

Most of the activity undertaken in the pilot projects focused on the formal school curriculum and how children performed in that context. Only two projects appeared to work directly with the parents of young children (or indeed with foster carers) – although some investment was made in equipment and environment in residential care. None seemed to take a holistic approach involving family, carers, teachers and other professionals – the key underpinning principle of GIRFEC – nor to promote, in a meaningful way, the attributes and experiences that are the prerequisites of good formal learning – play, communication, nurturing and sharing, nutrition, hygiene and stimulation. They also seemed, by and large, to reinforce unhelpful professional boundaries and to view the

care placement as a discrete and separate entity from the education setting. Possibly unsurprisingly, they had limited sustained impact on educational performance and outcomes.

This is not to deny that some children are likely to do better educationally after becoming looked after than they might have done otherwise. The fact is that older children looked after away from home attain better qualifications than those who are subject to compulsory measures of supervision while remaining at home. We should, however, expect the consistency and quality of care offered in a foster home or residential unit to be more supportive of education than a home from which a child had had to be removed. The outcomes achieved are, nonetheless, well adrift of those for the general population. At sixteen, average attainment points gained are currently about a third of the average across the population as a whole (51/141)⁷. It is impossible to say how younger children compare with their peers, given that no data are systematically collected.

Alongside the age profile, other aspects of the looked after population profile have also changed. Episodes of care are of shorter duration, and the 'threshold' of severity of risk or harm experienced by children who enter public care has become progressively higher. Greater numbers of children have shorter, but more frequent, care placements. Often, little work is done with parents to improve and support their parenting abilities while a child is in a care placement. This means that whatever progress the child makes during the placement might be diluted, undermined or completely lost when the child returns home. This is analogous with spending much public money on cleaning children up only to throw them back in the mud immediately afterwards. Research indicates that the likelihood of the return home being sustained is much reduced in such circumstances⁸.

The consequences of failing to improve on this unsatisfactory position are not only damaging for the children and young people themselves, but for future generations. They are more likely to become parents early in (or even before) adulthood and are likely to replicate the kind of parenting they have experienced themselves. Doing the things we know work, in a systemic and systematic way, can turn these lives around. Stopping doing what we know does not work will end waste of public funds and scarce resources. Children in Scotland proposes the following actions, all of which would result in significant positive change in both the short and the long term.

1. Our starting point should be that every child in Scotland should *really* have the 'best start in life'. Good quality Early Childhood Education and Care should be available to, and affordable by, every family. This would have numerous beneficial effects. Affordable, accessible high quality childcare will allow parents/carers to enter the workforce and help work really pay – thus alleviating family poverty, a major source of stress. Good quality support for child development and parenting, from a well-qualified workforce, should ensure that no child is allowed to fall behind. Children in Scotland's recent workforce research shows that these huge divergences in outcomes do not exist in countries with universal, integrated ECEC where staff are qualified to assess and support child and family in a holistic way⁹. The social pedagogue qualification offers a well-established conceptual framework for underpinning a holistic approach, both for young children in the community and for those caring for older children in residential care settings¹⁰.

2. In line with the principles of GIRFEC, holistic assessment should take place of each child's circumstances early in life. Where the balance of risk and resilience factors indicate that parents may need support beyond that offered by universal services, appropriate help should be provided. This help should be directed towards ensuring that children are not already set on a path towards lifelong disadvantage before they start school. Providing the right inputs to assist good attachment, language and communication development and effective social relationships will all result in fewer children needing help to do well educationally. It is clear that some families will struggle to provide these inputs without help. Parents with learning disabilities, for example, are less likely to expose children to the range of vocabulary from which other children benefit before reaching school. These parents are also at high risk of their children becoming looked after. Preliminary research findings indicate that around 40% of learning disabled parents lose care of

their children permanently. Guidance on implementation of GIRFEC should make clear that assessment and intervention must focus on the child **in the family context**; interventions directed solely at the child will not achieve sufficient meaningful and sustainable positive change.

3. Much more attention should be paid to the early learning of young children in the care system. It is, of course, paramount that children are removed from harmful and abusive situations, but removal will not in itself undo harm or neglect already experienced. Foster carers, social workers, health visitors (as well as specialist health professionals) and early years workers must work together to undo early damage and to ensure the child is as well equipped as possible to be ready to learn. Parents must be included in this work so that improvements achieved during a care placement are built upon over time, rather than lost after intensive intervention ends.

4. Monitoring of progress, for individuals and groups, should be improved. Comparative data should be regularly gathered on children's health, learning and development. This will facilitate speedy reaction to early indications of difficulty. In turn, this will reduce the volume and extent of educational failure.

5. A 'whole system' approach must be taken. The 'whole child' will not do well if only one piece of the jigsaw is in place. If someone with heart disease stops smoking, but continues to overeat and take no exercise, risk may be reduced but not as dramatically as if multiple good health behaviours are adopted simultaneously. Similarly, all the inputs a child needs must be provided. Reading to a child more when she or he is hungry and cold may be of some benefit, but it will be much less than if the other concerns are tackled at the same time. The 1995 Children (Scotland) Act intended a more corporate and comprehensive approach to be taken. Changes in 2009 to the Additional Support for Learning Act introduced a requirement for looked after children to be assessed to determine whether they require a Coordinated Support Plan. Legislation is therefore already in place that supports a holistic approach, both at individual and at organisational level, though it is not clear how much improvement in attainment has thereby been achieved. The forthcoming Children's Rights and Children's Service Bills should reinforce this objective by making both children's entitlements, and providers' duties, much more explicit and unambiguous.

6. The impact of trauma, neglect and abuse on children's learning must be taken into account. The whole children's sector workforce must be trained to understand how these kinds of experiences affect children, and what help they need to overcome their negative effects. Specialised services are needed to complement what mainstream provision can offer.

7. Targets for improvement must be set that incrementally close the gap between looked after children and the general child population. The same aspirations should be held for looked after children as for all other children. Scotland should neither hold – nor communicate to the children themselves – a 'lowest common denominator' of expectations for the well-being of looked after children. While two standard grades are better than none, this should not be seen as the pinnacle of achievement for a looked after child. We should be encouraging them to set their sights high and supporting them to achieve, over a finite timescale, the same proportion going to university and into the range of other positive destinations as those not looked after during childhood.

A whole generation has grown up since Sonia Jackson's early research. Some of the young people in her studies have become the parents of today's looked after children. We should act to get it right now, before yet another generation perpetuates this vicious circle.

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- 1 The Education of Children in Care (Jackson 1987)
 - 2 Growing up in Scotland: Changes in child cognitive ability in the pre-school years (Bradshaw 2011)
 - 3 Pre-school quality and educational outcomes at age 11: Low quality has little benefit (Kathy Sylva, Edward Melhuish, Pam Sammons, Iram Siraj-Blatchford and Brenda Taggart 2011)
 - 4 Parenting Matters: Early Years and Social Mobility (Centre Forum 2011)
 - 5 The Educational Attainment of Looked After Children – Local Authority Pilot Projects: Final Research Report (University of Strathclyde 2008)
 - 6 Children Looked After Statistics 2009/10 (Scottish Government)
 - 7 Educational Outcomes for Scotland’s Looked After Children 2009/10 (Scottish Government)
 - 8 The reunification of looked after children with their parents: Patterns, interventions and outcomes (Farmer 2006)
 - 9 Working for inclusion: an overview of European early years services and their workforce (Children in Scotland 2010)
 - 10 Exploring the benefits of Danish pedagogy (Children in Scotland 2010)

Children in Scotland is the national umbrella agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that policies and services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society. Children in Scotland represents more than 400 members, including the majority of Scottish local authorities, all major voluntary, statutory and private children’s agencies, professional organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children’s services. It is linked with similar agencies in other parts of the UK and Europe.

The work of Children in Scotland encompasses extensive information, policy, research and practice development programmes. The agency works closely with MSPs, the Scottish Government, local authorities and practitioners. It also services groups such as the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People (with YouthLink Scotland). In addition, Children in Scotland hosts Enquire - the national advice service for additional support for learning, and Resolve: ASL, Scotland’s largest independent education mediation service.