



Every Child Matters: Raising the Educational Achievement of Looked After Children: Challenges and Solutions for Local Authorities in England

Ignatius Isaac Dambudzo

The Zimbabwe Open University, PO Box MP1119, Mount Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article No.: 112912303 Type: Research DOI: 10.15580/GJER.2013.1.112912303 Submitted: 29/11/2012 Accepted: 15/01/2013 Published: 22/01/2013 *Corresponding Author Ignatius Isaac Dambudzo E-mail: idambudzo@yahoo.co.uk	Every Child Matters was an ambitious British Government programme to promote a holistic child development and integrated children's services in order to enhance their well-being, including educational achievement. Not all looked after children (LAC) have special education needs but they continue to underachieve compared to their peers. The 2004 Children Act placed 'the duty' of ensuring educational achievement of LAC on every local authority and yet performance remains poor. The study sought to investigate challenges local authorities faced in fulfilling 'the duty.' Content analysis of documents from different local authorities rated as adequate and inadequate by OFSTED was applied to identify obstacles, good practice and recommended action to improve.
Keywords: achievement, assessment, placement, looked after, Personal Educational Plans, every child matters	

INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale

Policy context

The children Act 1989 defines 'looked after children' as those previously known as children in care. (Department of Health (DoH), 1989). The category of children comprises those in foster care and in residential homes. Under the Children Act 1989, local authorities assumed the role of corporate parent for all the children in care. Social services professionals such as social workers were expected to work in partnership with parents and other agencies to promote and preserve the welfare and paramount position of the children in care. (Jackson and Martin, 1998). For example these young people were entitled to education and care provision which prepares them for adulthood and citizenship like any other children. This is in line with the 1989 United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Children to which the UK government is a signatory. (Fletcher-Campbell, 1997; UN, 1989). Further reforms have since been implemented to give greater focus to the welfare and development of all the children. The study focuses on those children in long term care, that is, twelve months or more.

Every Child Matters (ECM) (2003) is a government policy underpinned by the Children Act 2004. It sets out the Government's approach to the well-being of children and young people from birth to the age of nineteen years. The ECM seeks to give all children the support they need to: *be healthy, stay safe, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being*. The emphasis is on integrated working and holistic child development. (Department of Children Schools and Families (DCSF), 2007; Department for Education and Skills (DFES), 2004, 2005, 2006). The current study focuses on the outcome: *enjoy and achieve*. More specifically, the study will examine the educational achievement of LAC in England in terms of section 52 (Statutory Guidance) of the Children Act 2004. Inclusion of specific statutory guidance on the educational achievement of LAC underlines the importance the government attaches to the education of this group of children. The Statutory Guidance accompanying the 1989 Children Act formed the basis for excellent practice and a possible remedy for underachievement. However, academic achievement of LAC has remained significantly lower than their peers. (Jackson and Martin, 1998; DCSF, 2007). Research evidence appears to support the need for greater focus on LAC educational achievement.

Literature Review

Some children in care appeared to have positive attitudes towards care system in relation to their education. For example, a girl in care from the age of 15 to 17 had this to say,

'...I do not think I would have gone back to school or done well in school and wanted to go on to college...if I had stayed at home...' (Ward, Skuse and Munro, 2005).

Research has consistently reported poor educational achievement for young people in or leaving care. (Jackson, 1994 in Jackson and Martin, 1998 p.571; Hibbert, 2001:26; DFES, 2005). Sir William Utting (Director of Children's Services (1997) cited in Hibbert (2001) described the persistent underachievement of LAC as a failure to ensure children's welfare under the Children Act 1989. He described the situation as 'scandalous'. Politicians too echoed the same sentiments about the educational performance of LAC. The following quotations illustrate the point:

'The story of children in care is a woeful tale of failures.' (Frank Dobson and Labour Health Secretary, 1997 in YPN, p.13).

'The state has been a poor parent to children in care for too long.' (Kevin Brennan, the Labour Junior Children's Minister, 2007 when he introduced the Children and Young Persons Bill). (Smith, 2007 in YPN p.13).

'...government has spent almost £1 billion on children in care, yet a significant gap remains between their performance compared with other children and young people.' (Ruth Smith, in *Young People Now*, 21-27 November, 2007 p.13).

Statements such as these by politicians in government underscore the gravity of the situation regarding the education of children in care, and also the government's commitment to resolving the issue. The statements also highlight the challenges facing some local authorities in promoting the educational achievement of LAC as 'corporate parents'. Consequently more research is needed to find out what local authorities can do to raise the academic achievement of LAC hence this study. Social workers too added their voice to concerns expressed by others concerning the education of LAC.

For example, one social worker in a study: *'The education of LAC'*, acknowledged the importance of education for LAC thus:

'...when he came on the scene, he was a child who had given up but who, with attention to his education, was able to enjoy a much more meaningful life.' (Fletcher-Campbell, 1997).

Comments such as the one stated above imply that something can be done to raise the educational achievement of LAC. Consequently, it is vital that issues concerning the education of LAC be investigated thoroughly to uncover obstacles to their educational achievement, and enable them to enjoy and progress in life. Investigating causes of failure involves assessment work by social workers. Once known, the removal or minimisation of obstacles is social work and the social worker's responsibility. This can be done in partnership

with other agencies in order to make life better for the children. The study is therefore relevant to social work practice. There were also problems presented by social workers in terms of the LAC educational achievement. For example, one participant pointed out weaknesses in personnel when she said,

'Those trying to enhance the education of LAC were apparently working in an alien environment which was not conducive to the type of practice required...the organisation has the problem, not the child.' (Fletcher-Campbell, 1997).

Furthermore, when asked what part a social worker had played in their educational success, 92% of the successful care leavers reported, 'none,' while the rest felt that social workers had made significant contribution to their success. However, no direct help to overcome educational problems or enhance opportunities had been given hence the need to find out what social workers can do to overcome the difficulties

being experienced for the benefit of the children. (Jackson and Martin, 1998).

Role of Local Authorities in Raising Educational Achievement

Raising the attainment of LAC is one of the central responsibilities of local authorities and their partners. Detailed guidance to raise educational achievement has been provided for all local authorities and yet educational performance remains poor. (DCSF, 2007). For example, Table 1 gives a profile of academic achievement of LAC between 2005 and 2008 in General Certificate of Secondary education (GCSE) and General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ). (DFES, 2005; DCSF, 2007; Barker, 2009). The information in Table 1 shows significantly lower percentage pass rates for LAC, hence the need to investigate more to find out challenges faced by local authorities in trying to raise the educational achievement of LAC.

Table 2: General Certificate of Secondary Education Performance in England for Looked After Children: 2005-2008.

Year..... Characteristic	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Number in Year11	4700	5100	5100	5100	
% sitting one GCSE or GNVQ					
% obtaining at least one GCSE: Grade A* to G or GNVQ	64 (98.8)	65.6 (98.5)	67.7 (99.5)	66.8 (99.1)	
% obtaining five GCSE or GNVQ: Grade: A* to G	60.2 (97.4)	63.2 (97.8)	63.7 (98.9)	65.6 (98.6)	
% obtaining five GCSE or GNVQ: Grade: A* to C	40.7 (90.2)	41.4 (90.5)	43.1 (91.7)	43.4 (91.6)	
	10.8 (57.1)	11.8 (59.2)	12.6 (62.0)	13.9 (65.3)	

Figures in brackets: Percentage pass rate for all other children in England excluding LAC.

Figures in **bold** print: percentage pass rate for looked after children.

Source: DFES (2005-2006), DCSF (2007-2009).

The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) Reports (2009) also point out the widening gap in performance between LAC and their peers, suggesting that there are problems with implementation of ECM outcome, to achieve.

Since some care leavers felt that they could achieve more with support from social workers and that government expects educational achievement to be top priority of every local authority, the study seeks to: (1) identify and evaluate challenges for social work and social workers presented by ECM in trying to raise the educational achievement of LAC, (2) recommend measures to improve their educational achievement. Consequently, the study seeks to investigate the following research question:

Research Question

What are the challenges facing local authorities in raising the educational achievement of LAC?

Sub-questions:

1. What challenges does placement pose for local authorities trying to raise the educational achievement of LAC?
2. What challenges does planning pose for local authorities trying to raise educational achievement of LAC?
3. What challenges does assessment pose for local authorities trying to raise the educational achievement of LAC?
4. What challenges does target setting pose for local authorities trying to raise the educational achievement of LAC?
5. What challenges do *joint working* and *information sharing* pose for local authorities trying to raise the educational achievement of LAC?
6. What challenges are posed by children's individual characteristics for local authorities trying to raise the educational achievement of LAC?
7. What challenges are posed by staff for local authorities trying to raise the educational achievement of LAC?

8. What can local authorities do to overcome the challenges to raise the educational achievement of LAC?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Comparative qualitative design was used to investigate how social work and social workers can contribute towards the effective implementation of the ECM to enhance educational achievement of LAC.

Sample

Twenty local authorities in England, ten each rated as adequate to outstanding and inadequate respectively were selected. Rating was based on OFSTED categories.

METHOD

Document analysis was used to answer the question: How can LAs improve educational achievement of LAC as *corporate parents*? The following data sources were used.

1. Databases of LAC, Social Care Online reports and academic records generated by social services. Local authorities were selected on the basis of OFSTED ratings of their performance.
2. Quality Assessment Reports: OFSTED/SSI, Joint Area Reviews.
3. Official documents were assessed for quality by applying J. Scott (1990:6 in Bryman 2001: 370-1) criteria namely: *authenticity* (how genuine the evidence is); *credibility* (freedom from error); *representativeness* (how typical evidence was); *meaning* (was evidence clear and easy to understand?). Bryman (2001:375) underlines the importance of official documents for social research: '*source of great deal of information,...statistical information,...textual material such as Acts of Parliament and official reports of potential significance to social researchers.*'

In seeking to answer the research question the following procedures were followed:

1. Identified targets from the statutory guidance on the duty of local authorities
2. to promote educational achievement of LAC (Section 52 of the Children's
3. Act, 2004).
4. Compared statutory guidance targets with Children's Plans to assess how
5. far the targets are met in the plans. (Look for key words: *support*,
6. *placement, planning, assessment, monitoring, joint working and information sharing*).

7. Prepared a coding manual to reflect practices by LAs (S=support;
8. P=placement; PL=planning; A=assessment; M=monitoring; JW=joint working;
9. IS=information sharing).
10. Coded content of reports: JARs, APAs and OFSTED (Placed a
11. code in the text whenever you come across a statement on the practice
12. by LAs).
13. Tabulate coding results under the key words representing
14. adequate to outstanding, and inadequate LAs.
15. Described, explained and evaluated practices in relation to the role of
16. social workers in promoting educational achievements of LAC.
17. Bronfenbrenner's (1967) Ecological Model and Stufflebeam's (1971)
18. Context, Input, Process and Product Model (CIPP) guided the study.
19. Their focus on inputs, processes and products (outcomes) was critical in
20. evaluating the effectiveness of the ECM using systems approach.

Study resources and risks

1. Study resources included: Science, social services (LAC), DCSF, OFSTED databases for Year 11 students (2005-2009) outlining what LAs were doing to promote educational achievement.
2. Inspection reports detail how far LAs fulfilled the duty.
3. National Statistics (First Release, November, 2009) provide information on average academic performance (GCSE).
4. Literature from Journals, Quality Protects Research Briefings (Department of Health (DoH), 2000) gave information on what evidence was currently available on educational achievement of LAC and parental involvement in education.
5. Database for individual LAs provided data on Children's Plans.

(See Appendix 2 for Literature Search Strategies and Data Sources details).

Access to databases was free and no ethical permissions were sought.

Risks: There were no data for individual children and young people, hence averages were used. Time constraint was the main risk because the study was done concurrently with work and family commitments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Placement

Pressure on foster placements and the lack of appropriate children's homes have created significant difficulties for the placing authority. Consequently children were moved to foster agencies and places away from the home area. Placements outside the

home local authority resulted in infrequent visits and contacts from social workers due to distance, time and costs. This became even more complicated for children with special educational needs (SEN) because the responsibility for the statements remained with the home local authority. Practical problems arose when social workers and the LEA who were supposed to attend annual review meetings failed to attend. Monitoring of educational progress became even more difficult resulting in poor performance. Frequent movements obviously resulted in disrupted schooling characterised by long periods of absence, poor literacy and numeracy skills, learning difficulties and a breakdown in communication about children's attainment and educational needs. (OFSTED, and Social Services Inspectorate, 1996; DoH, 1999; Hibbert, 2001).

According to Utting (1997) placement of a child who is looked after can have a marked impact on schooling. For example, changes in foster placements and children's homes accompanied by changes of school can often result in poor educational progress leading to disaffection and truancy which in turn led to poor educational performance. This was a challenge for local authorities.

Staff turnover

Staff turnover was another challenge for local authorities because it affected consistency of monitoring of children's educational progress. Poor monitoring adversely affected children's education. It should be noted that the social services department (SSD) was the placing authority and the designated social worker for each child link person with the local education authority (LEA). The latter was responsible for ensuring a school place, monitoring the child's progress, issuing and reviewing the statement of special educational needs. Communication of information to SSD was often not done pro-actively. The designated social worker did not seek or follow up information on the child's progress as a representative of the corporate parent. Thus problems concerning schooling may have remained unresolved leading to negative educational experiences. Placing children was a very difficult task for the placing authority. (Cleaver et al., 2000; Hibbert, 2001). Challenges associated with placements can be illustrated by the following example of a Year Nine pupil, code named B.

B has had numerous placements and could not remember the exact number. He has been in his present children's home for about a year. He was excluded from a secondary school in another authority, then had home tuition and finally was referred to the Looked After Children Education Service (LACES) after nine months of absence from school. He now has two days a week at LACES and three days in the children's home without schooling. The teacher in charge was concerned that if they provided full-time provision (not what LACES was intended for), the SSD would stop looking for a school. The home has looked for a suitable school place without success as two nearby schools are in special measures and one has a 97%

Asian/Afro/Caribbean population where B would be very much a minority. This, it was judged, would not solve B's present problems. [local provision had been exhausted and there is no immediate solution].

An interview revealed that B was unaware of reasons behind his problems and how they could be alleviated. Academic problems were caused by missing school and that it was impossible to catch up. The LACES did not provide additional work for the three days spent in the home every week. In addition, residential workers were not teachers hence they could not help him with academic work. Therefore, his chances of obtaining any GCSE grades were very low. Finally his behaviour made mainstream schooling an unrealistic expectation. B however, thinks that the following can help improve his situation: more space in the classroom to lessen overcrowding and bullying which led him to lose his temper, more computers at school and at home, organised playground activities, one consistent social worker who was interested in education and good examination results. Meeting these needs was a real challenge for local authorities and schools.

Placement Instability

Placement instability was yet another challenge for local authorities. For example, two in five looked after children for over five years had experienced more than six placements while a quarter with five years' care history had witnessed more than ten placements. The changes imply changes in carers and schools as well. Instability affected schooling and educational progress hence low performance. (Ward et al. 2005). Strangely, adolescents did not see changing placements as harmful to their development. (Department of Health (DoH), 2000).

Importance of placement stability

The importance of placement stability can be understood in terms of attachment theory. It says that, in order for infants to develop emotionally, they required a close and consistent relationship with an adult who provided protection, care and comfort. If the quality of care-giving was inadequate, emotional damage could result. Children can come to see themselves as less likeable and others as untrustworthy. In extreme cases looked after children may feel helpless, angry and out of control. Anti-social behaviour often results. Having missed out on early nurturing experiences with parents, an opportunity may nevertheless arise later to form an attachment relationship with a foster parent, carer, residential worker or adoptive parent. However, this relationship needed to be consistent and dependable. (DoH, 1999).

Thus, changing placements affected educational achievement through loss of learning time, unsuitable placements, incomplete school work, poor monitoring, inappropriate schools, poor attendance and administrative bureaucracy especially if placement was outside the home local authority. High educational achievement could not be expected under conditions of instability.

Information availability and sharing

Research and evidence about practice across Europe have highlighted similar questions and concerns about meeting the needs of children in care. (Selwyn and Sturges, 2001; Warman and Roberts, 2002; Weyts, 2002). Like all other European countries there was a concern about the lack of data for meaningful and holistic understanding of the problems of looked after children. (Selwyn and Sturges, 2001).

Ambiguous and inaccurate data

A study by Jacklin, Robinson and Torrance (2006) commissioned by a UK agency responsible for raising the attainment of looked after children focused on Year 11 pupils aged between 15 and 16 years. They examined SSD databases and school files for about 59 pupils. Results revealed that data was ambiguous, inadequate and there were discrepancies between SSD and the LEA. For example, of the 42-48 children on the SSD database only 43 had been referred to the LEA while 47 on the LEA did not appear on the SSD database. Besides being ambiguous, the data revealed lack of communication between the SSD and the LEA which affected the quality of decisions made, service provision and monitoring of looked after children's education. These challenges needed addressing.

Educational attainment data: Record keeping, information sharing and utilisation

Some records were incomplete. For example, entries such as 'no results' or 'no data' were quite common. It is not clear whether students had not taken the exam or results were not known to the LEA. It was not clear what 'no data' meant. The missing information rendered the information about looked after children less helpful in planning for their needs. In some cases data about individual children was either unavailable or incomplete. Frequent movements or change of placements made record keeping very important. Information on attainment, attendance, behaviour attitude, category of need and effort was vital for the receiving schools to provide appropriate support. (OFSTED, 2001; Jackson *et al.*, 2002; Fletcher-Campbell and Archer, 2003; Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), 2003; Wilson *et al.*, 2004)

In addition information on the curriculum was important. The subjects, the level, coursework, examination board and what had been covered was often not communicated. This did not always happen. This provided the receiving school and teachers a starting point. It was not enough to keep records but to pass it on or share with other agencies whenever a child moved. Professionals should be able to utilise the data to help the child. Thus, information sharing and utilisation were important aspects professionals in both social services and education failed to do. The common problem was that professionals might have lots of data but did not know what to do with it. On the other hand social workers might not know or understand data they received from schools. Last but not least, the strictly age dependent education system meant that some children

reached the end of the compulsory education without basic skills and knowledge. Expecting such children to obtain even a single GCSE or GNVQ would be unrealistic. These are challenges which policy makers, local authorities and schools have to address for the benefit of the children. (Jacklin *et al.*, 2006; OFSTED, 2001). The information shared would enable professionals to make quality decisions about the child's education. Inter-agency collaboration was therefore vital to facilitate information sharing for the benefit of the children. The following extract from a child underscored the impact information sharing has:

'Do you wonder I am angry? I've just walked out of a maths exam having sworn at a teacher. When I looked at the paper the figures swam before my eyes. I could have done that paper yesterday, I could probably do it tomorrow, but I was put into a children's home last night, away from my mother, and with my head in chaos, and my stomach in turmoil, I didn't know where to begin.' (Thirteen year old girl said). [The teacher administering the test was not aware of the situation and had, therefore, not been in a position to offer support.] It was therefore, a big challenge for local authorities to keep accurate records of children they looked after and to share it with relevant agencies especially schools to promote children's educational achievement.

Needs Assessment

Assessment takes place at two levels, individual and community. The two are interlinked because the data collected from the individual assessments informs the planning of local and national services provision. Effective planning can only take place with relevant and accurate data. Assessment was central to professional activity because it aided understanding of what was happening to a child and family, and also informed decisions about action to be taken or services to be provided. Good assessment was underpinned by the following principles: child centred, rooted in child development, ecological in its approach, ensured equality of opportunity, involved working with children and families, built on strengths as well as identified difficulties, was inter-agency in its approach to assessment and provision of services and a continuing process and not a single event. (Cleave *et al.*, 2000; DFES, 2007).

Assessments were:

- **carried out in parallel with other actions and provision of services.**
- **grounded in evidence-based knowledge (11s Guidance on Safeguarding and Promoting the**

Welfare of Children and Revised: Working Together to Safeguard Children. (DFES, 2007).

The use of 'The Framework of Assessment of Children in Need' and their families is in itself a challenge. Ensuring that assessments were carried out in collaboration with other agencies, involved children,

parents/carers so that the overall plan of action and interventions included contributions from everyone. However, additional challenges such as staff recruitment, retention and record keeping had to be overcome. While family involvement was relatively easy for the initial assessments it was more difficult for core assessments because of the amount of detail that had to be recorded. Furthermore, some social workers misunderstood the purpose of the assessment records and used them as questionnaires with families rather than as a record of the assessment. Some social workers expressed anxiety about their ability to carry out the assessments especially analysis of information gathered, how to work collaboratively with other professionals from other agencies. (Cleaver *et al.*, 2000). Key problems associated with assessment included:

- a) Assessment not being carried out in a timely manner (Inquiry Reports and SSI (now CSCI) commenting on the absence of assessments from children's files.
- b) Comprehensive or core assessments were not carried out at all.
- c) Failure to provide services to address the needs identified by the assessment.
- d) Agencies working separately in a fragmented and uncoordinated manner.
- e) Children experiencing many assessments but receiving few services that resulted in positive outcomes in their lives.
- f) Poor quality of assessments for example addressing short term objectives instead of sustainable support.
- g) Service led interventions and inability to work with complexity of children's lives.
- h) social workers' inability to consider and analyse information they have to inform decision making.
- i) failure to link assessment to intervention. (DFES, 2007).

An assessment done properly would provide a sound base for planning interventions to alleviate the problem. Assessment of looked after children's educational needs without involving the children, parents/carers and the school has resulted in incomplete plans and ineffective interventions leading to low educational achievement. Thorough assessment provided a sound basis for Personal Educational Plans (PEPs).

Planning/Personal Educational Plans

Data such as a child's school history and attainment together with other family and environmental factors enabled planning of more effective interventions provided that practitioners understood the data and feedback from assessment. Assessment frameworks were 'sets of maps that guided social workers towards helpful analyses. Whatever the model of assessment, the ultimate purpose was to contribute towards the understanding that was necessary for appropriate planning. Planning involved preparation, collection, weighing, analysing and utilising the data. (Jacklin *et al.*, 2006).

One of the challenges was that plans failed to address barriers to learning, and support emotional resilience of individual children working with families, agencies and communities. This might be due to weak strategic leadership with unclear aims that failed to guide schools and services to address children's educational needs. Thus opportunities to improve the learning environment, curriculum, support, teaching and learning for looked after children were missed leading to poor educational performance. (Hibbert, 2001, Fletcher-Campbell, 1997). Leaving out parents during the planning risked failure of school efforts to help and support children's development. (Dyson, Gallannaugh, Humphrey, Lendrum and Wigelsworth, 2010). Hibbert (2001) underscored the importance of planning and joint working. She pointed out that successful implementation of children's plans required effective co-operation between agencies especially SSD and education. Education was to be the focus of all the planning and the statutory 'looked after children review'. Hibbert argued that, the fact that the law required the publication of the reviews for looked after children was in itself indicative of failure to implement 'the duty' hence demand for written evidence. Implementation could only take place if the planning was clear about what to do and what outcomes were expected.

Implementation

Another challenge involved local authorities struggling to translate their intentions into an effective preventative strategy due to the lack of the capacity to evaluate children's educational needs. In some cases local authorities did not have specific service delivery timetables. This weakened target setting and monitoring yet specificity was vital if Personal Educational Plans were to be used to improve children's educational achievement. (SSI, 2004).

Thus, the lack of collaborative inter-agency planning, failure to put education at the centre of planning, unclear aims and objectives were challenges that compromised educational progress of looked after children.

Attainment targets/low expectations/low motivation

Quality Protects sub-objective 4.1 (DoH, 1999) states: '...to bring the overall performance of children looked after for a year or more in National Curriculum Tests closer in line with local children generally.' This formed the underpinning philosophy for the 'Guidance'. The specific target however, was to improve the educational attainment of children looked after, by increasing to at least fifty percent by 2001 the proportion of children leaving care at sixteen or later with one GCSE or GNVQ qualification; and to seventy five percent by 2003. This was a very low expectation by the corporate parent. Hibbert (2001) described this target as an insult to young people looked after. She expected corporate parents to have similar ambitions for young people in their care to those parents in the general population. A single GCSE or GNVQ was insufficient for the young people to secure a decent job and a better standard of living after school. Such low aspirations by corporate

parents may reflect a lack of understanding of the world out of school or a lack of ownership. Consequently children lacked motivation from those who looked after them. A low target such as this sent a wrong message to the young people, their carers, teachers and social workers. (Hibbert, 2001). Others argued that the greatest challenge was to correct earlier disadvantages children had suffered in their lives. Planning for educational improvement posed the challenge of staffing.

Staffing

Various categories of staff played key roles in the education of looked after children. Key staff included teachers, social workers and residential workers/carers. Children liked social workers who acted as their advocates, provided quality support, listened and communicated with them appropriately. Social workers were disliked if they could not display these qualities as the following extract demonstrated:

'I really didn't like her...cos every time I tried talking to her, she always butted in, wouldn't let me talk.' (Boy looked after from the age of 9-12). In contrast, those who established good relationships with social workers and were empowered had this to say:

'We were like friends. She was there for me when I needed help. She also left me alone to be able to fend for myself...the main thing was that the support was there when it was needed.' (Boy looked after from the age of 14-18), (Hibbert, 2001). The above quotations demonstrate that relationships made a difference to the child's development. Relationships were likely to affect attitude towards schooling and performance in school as well. This was a challenge for local authorities and staff. This was supported by Ward *et al.* (2005) who pointed out that residential staff who lacked empathy and had low morale were generally unpopular with looked after children while those supportive were highly valued. Staff who communicated and understood the children were greatly appreciated. ..., 'were good... friendly and had excellent attitudes towards you. They were just there for you.' The young people were aware of the social worker's role in their welfare and educational achievement. On their part, social workers as advocates expressed their commitment to ensuring regular attendance at school and that children received appropriate education. However, a heavy case load (17 looked after children) and a shortage of social workers restricted the amount of time social workers could devote to each young person. In addition, staff movements within the SSD rendered social worker contacts with children very difficult. In some cases young people went for long periods without a designated social worker. It would appear that continuity of schooling was not given the highest priority. (DoH, 2000).

Social workers were dependent on schools for reports on educational achievement and progress. Forms on looked after children were not always completed and when completed, information recorded was not always relevant or accurate to levels of

achievement. However, reports submitted for review meetings were usually detailed and accurate but were sometimes difficult to interpret since some social workers had little knowledge of the language used in education, for example, level of achievement and key stages. (OFSTED and DoH, 1999). These challenges needed addressing for children to improve educational attainment from the staff employed to work with them.

Some residential staff were aware of the challenges that impacted on children's educational achievement. They commented on frequent changes in staff rotas which they described as de-stabilising on the young people. It was therefore, difficult to maintain continuity in overseeing homework and preparing for school and for individual workers to make constant contact with the schools. In addition, the workers had little or no knowledge of what was required in specific subjects. Some children reported that no one took interest in what they were doing at school apart from making sure that they were properly dressed in the morning.

'No one ever asked what you'd done in the day or said well done if you got a good mark. It was, get your uniform off and it's time for tea.' (A young person in care) (Jackson and Martin, 1998). Not only was staff's lack of interest in education a problem but the lack of facilities for school work as well. Young people reported that no facilities were provided for doing homework. This made it difficult for staff to offer the necessary support consistently, especially at Key Stage 4. This was compounded by shortages of resources in the homes. (OFSTED, DoH, 1999). Another challenge the local authorities had to content with was the diversity of looked after population.

Diversity of looked after children

Local authorities were corporate parents to a diverse group of young people. The young people differed in terms of ethnicity, age, category of need, academic ability, placements, duration of care, school, behaviour, family background and gender. The differences implied differing needs. For example, of all the looked after children in 2009: 64% (white British), 7% (Mixed), 9% (Asian), 11% (Black) and 11% (Other), (DCSF, 2009). The children were looked after for different reasons. For example, abuse and neglect (49%), child's disability (3%), parents' illness or disability (5%), family in acute stress (11%), family dysfunction (4%), low income (0%), socially unacceptable behaviour (4%) and absent parenting (14%). (DCSF, 2009). The differences were further compounded by different living conditions in the placements, the schools where children attended and staff attitudes towards the children at home and at school. These characteristics influenced the child's education. Local authorities faced the challenge of understanding cultures of different ethnic groups and the individual children in order to give the most appropriate support. Hibbert (2001) described the nature of the difficulties caused by ethnic diversity. She pointed out that the needs of black and minority ethnic children were not always considered adequately in the care or educational placements. Young people living

away from their families in placements that may or may not take into account their cultural, ethnic, racial or linguistic needs, experienced difficulties in forming a sense of identity and self-esteem. In cases where English was not their first language children were less able to communicate their needs and concerns. The absence of role models among ethnic minorities presents yet another barrier to personal development and educational achievement. This was not an easy task. Accommodating the diverse needs of each one of the children was indeed a big challenge both in care settings and schooling.

Joint working

Section 52 of the Guidance (2005) underscores the requirement for education and social services to work closely not only in data handling but in emphasising their responsibilities for the education of looked after children that social workers and carers have in partnership with schools. This was further emphasised by the National Standards for Foster Carers, 2000 (National Carers Association, 2000). In order to avoid conflict, and for the effective implementation of education programmes for the children, all placement agreements should include joint definition of roles of social workers, foster carers and parents in fostering the child's education to avoid role confusion. For example, The National Standards required that foster carers promoted and maximised educational opportunities and achievements for young people. Furthermore, requirements that care arrangements in placements should always include arrangements for suitable education. This was a challenge that could be overcome through joint planning and working for the benefit of the children. (Hibbert, 2001).

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

What Local Authorities can do to Provide Stability and Continuity for Looked after Children

In the previous chapter, it has been shown how placement instability affected children's education. This section sought to outline what local authorities could do to promote placement stability as a means of promoting educational improvement. The overall aim of local authorities should be to: provide stability and continuity for personal development and educational achievement. To achieve the aim, local authorities should seek to address the following objectives: They should ensure

- (1) stability in care placement.**
- (2) stability in school placement.**
- (3) stability in staffing especially social workers and residential staff.**
- (4) that children were securely attached to carers capable of providing safe and effective care during childhood.**
- (5) placement within home local authority boundaries and near home.**

Stability in care placement

Generally, children's outcomes have been linked to placement stability. For example, children who had experienced the least disruptions in their lives had better adjustment in adult life than those who experienced disruptions. (DoH, 2000, Jackson and Martin, 1998). However, adolescents (14-17 years) who experienced more frequent changes in residence did not regard frequent changes in placements as harmful. Understandably, this is the age group that was more detached from adults especially parents and could form friendships fairly easily. While they were happy with social development, disruption to their education was not taken into account. The government has, through the Young Persons, Bill (2007), directed that local authorities increase the variety of placements available to the children in order to minimise both movements within and outside home authority boundaries' placements. In addition, through Quality Protects, the government has set the target of less than 16% of the children experiencing at least three placements. These measures were meant to improve stability in children's placements. Stability in care placements also meant stability in school placements. Remaining in the school was likely to provide consistency in learning and education provision leading to better achievement.

Stability in school placement

Most schools followed the national curriculum but examinations were provided by different examination boards and teachers differed from school to school. Staying in the same school made it easier for the children to get used to their teachers and school mates, consistent encouragement, mentors and role models. This settled their minds and allowed for some concentration. It made it easier to monitor their progress from the beginning to the end. It ensured that coursework was done and completed on time.

Children's behaviour could be monitored easily and better thereby reducing the chances of being excluded and truancy too. Regular attendance enhanced learning and better outcomes. Exclusions made it harder for children to integrate when they eventually re-joined. Once excluded children received incomplete education. Home based tuition was poorly monitored and offered less than 10% schooling. Looked after children therefore, reached compulsory school age with inadequate educational skills and knowledge to pass examinations. Appointment of school based social workers or education officers have been effective in stabilising school attendance. This could enhance achievement in school. Through 'Care Matters' schools were required to give looked after children priority in school placement.

Stability in staffing

It has been noted that frequent changes in staff disrupts continuity in relationships for the children. This in turn disrupted attachments and support already being

provided. There should be minimal changes in designated social worker for every child. Staff in residential homes should have a measure of continuity by way of shift rotas and actual staff on the ground. This would ensure continuity in monitoring progress and cementing a relationship for attachment. Local authorities on their part should have a designated person to oversee the education of the children more consistently and to liaise with the school. Local authorities should make education top priority as a corporate parent by appointing persons with interest in children's education. This could be a school worker, social worker, education support worker and encourage family involvement in the child's education progress. Designated staff must encourage regular school attendance by all the children, that way they promoted regular interaction with the teachers and access to all the school work and minimise lagging. . It was however, not enough to have a designated social worker. He or she must be well informed in education matters, reliable, accessible and able to develop a relationship of trust with the young person. (DoH, 2000; Jackson and Martin, 1998).

Secure attachment to carers

Research has shown that stability can be achieved depending on the carer's characteristics. For example, carers who enjoyed being with the children, were family centred, emotionally resilient and communicated openly and honestly, flexible and firm carers provided a more stable environment for the children. Placement of children with families that reflected the same ethnicity, culture, language and religion tended to promote stability. However, while families had been successful with ethnic minority children, there was however, the need to pay attention to issues of identity, continuity with the child's own culture, experiences of racism, personal care needs and preferences and possible rivalry and jealousy with carer's children. (DoH, 2000). The measures have important implications for social workers. Since some of the children ended up returning to their own families, social workers should always maintain positive relationship with the child and family. Assessment should be thoroughly followed by careful evaluation of the strengths, weaknesses, risks and protective factors within the families and children. This should include assessment of the environment as well. Siblings should be kept together unless there were strong compelling factors for their separation. Thorough assessment would ensure that children were placed in appropriate environments with carers equipped to support the children. This would reduce placement failures and promote stability. Social workers should pay attention to children's views about where they want to live. Children, carers and any other interested parties should be involved in planning and preparation for placement. Carers should receive maximum support from social workers and other professionals. (DoH, 2000; Hibbert, 2001).

For adolescents, shared care may be planned for if preferred. This involved living in different settings at different times as part of the overall care plan. Continuity in relationships may be important for young

people and should be planned for also. Above all, social workers should provide continuity in children's education and not just care placements. Within the school, children could broaden their social networks and benefit from teachers' support. Whatever residential setting children were in, social workers should ensure regular attendance at school and avoid exclusions and suspensions. (DoH, 2000; Jackson and Martin, 1998).

Thus, monitoring placement moves, targeting recruitment of carers, training in behaviour management detailed assessment of individual circumstances and needs, providing continuity in relationships and education could help promote stability and a favourable atmosphere for better learning and achievement.

Planning

Planning needed to put education at the centre and should be based on inter-agency co-operation. Planning for education should be an integral part of the overall care planning.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The above presentation has highlighted the challenges faced by local authorities. These included placement, frequent, changes, inadequate data for planning education, staffing and planning. Children's welfare was paramount and so was their education in order to prepare them for their future roles in society as adults. It was important that local authorities placed looked after children nearer home, minimise frequency of changes in placements, encouraged inter-agency working to plan the education of the children. They should set high aspirations for the children the same as their peers. Staff appointed to look after them had to have knowledge and understanding of education and should be interested in helping children with their school work at any time. Listening to their voices would go a long way to raise their achievement as the interaction would allow those looking after the children to understand children's needs. Further research is needed to find out more about specific activities and plans for different local authorities to meet the challenges for the benefit of the children.

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