Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Bristol	
Unit of Assessment: 20) Social Work and Social Policy	
Title of case study: Effecting policy and practice change in England to improve the educational outcomes of Children in Care	
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014 - 2020	
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:	

Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
David Berridge	Professor of Child and Family Welfare	04/1985 - 06/2019
	Emeritus Professor of Child and Family Welfare	07/2019 – present
Sally Thomas	Professor of Education	01/2001 – present
Karen Bell	ESRC Future Leader Fellow	11/2011 – 02/2019

Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 – 2020	
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No	

1. Summary of the impact

An assumption that Children in Care are likely to experience negative outcomes does a grave disservice to them, social workers and their carers. Research over 13 years by Berridge and colleagues has **changed the narrative of policy makers** in discussions about the positive effects of State Care on the lives of separated children. It also led to **major changes in policy and practice in England**, including Department for Education, Ofsted, House of Commons Education Committee and Conservative Party Election Manifesto 2017. **Individual local authorities** have **changed their policies and practices** towards education for Children in Care, including individual decisions for children.

2. Underpinning research

Professor Berridge was for many years a lone voice in arguing that the Care system in England is not inherently damaging to children's education but is generally beneficial. In a seminal paper [1], he observed that commentators have often falsely linked the low attainments of Children in Care (CIC) to the care experience itself — confusing correlation with causation. An official report from the Social Exclusion Unit (2003) had claimed that, even taking into account prior disadvantage, '*…children in care do significantly worse than their peers'.* The justification for this claim, Berridge argued, was *'unconvincing'* [1]. His own theoretical and empirical research has effectively undermined this dangerous assertion. He pointed out a failure to take account of sociological research on the attainment gap, including the association between social class, poverty and attainment. The socio-economic context of children's pre-Care experiences is relevant in influencing learning, educational engagement and attainment. Family breakdown has an impact on children's schooling, as do experiences of neglect and abuse and special educational needs including learning, social, emotional and mental health difficulties.

In 2014, the Nuffield Foundation funded a mixed-methods, multidisciplinary joint-research project led by Professor Berridge with Professor Judy Sebba (Co-PI) and colleagues in the Rees Centre, University of Oxford [i]. Previous studies in this field mainly focused on the social work issues contributing to low educational attainments; this study differed in that it linked perspectives both from social work and educational experts. Expertise on education, psychology

and statistics came from Oxford; complementary expertise on social work, sociology, education and qualitative analysis was provided by the University of Bristol.

The quantitative component of the project linked Department for Education (DfE) data sets on children's social care (Children Looked After Database CLAD) and education (National Pupil Database NPD), which had not previously been analysed in conjunction. This was the first study of Children in Care to focus on educational **progress** as well as **attainment.** This is important to take into account as many children enter Care late in their secondary education.

Key findings were that:

- Controlling statistically for all relevant background factors, CIC overall made better educational progress than did similar children still living at home with their parents ('Children in Need') [2]. The Care system, therefore, makes a positive contribution to their education. This was a ground-breaking finding; no major empirical study in the UK had made this point previously.

- Instability in the care system led to worse educational attainment and progress. For example, each change in Care placement during secondary school was linked with one-third of a grade less at GCSE; and CIC who changed schools during their final two years of secondary education scored over five grades lower at GCSE than those who did not. Poorer educational results were also associated with school exclusions, unauthorised school absences, attending alternative education settings and living in residential care [2].

- Qualitative interviews complemented the quantitative results as well as highlighting factors absent from the national databases. Those who made good educational progress explained that several elements first needed to be in place: they needed to feel safe and secure where they were currently living; birth family problems needed to be managed and contained; and they needed to be looked after and taught by individuals who genuinely cared about them and could cope with their individual circumstances and problems at school [2].

Further analysis of this dataset for a subsequent publication, led by Professor Berridge, including 26 young people, their carers, social workers and teachers, applied a theoretical framework linking the Sociology of Childhood with the Social Ecology of Resilience. It revealed that the young people were exercising control over their educational experiences – an expression of agency. They chose to engage with learning once they felt the problems in their lives were being managed and, therefore, that certain preconditions were being met. All but one considered that separation from home and entry to Care had a positive effect on their lives, educationally as well as generally [3].

Additional funding from the Nuffield Foundation [ii], enabled further investigation of factors underpinning the attainment of CIC. This research focused on a whole birth cohort of all children in England born in 2000/01, starting school in 2006/07 and tracked through to their GCSE examinations in 2017. This was complemented by 123 interviews with children, parents/carers and professionals. The findings revealed that young children who needed a social worker by the age of seven had better educational attainments at 16 if they experienced a long-stay period in Care than those who did not [5].

3. References to the research

1. **Berridge D.** (2007). Theory and explanation in child welfare: education and looked after children, *Child and Family Social Work*, 12, 1-10. DOI:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2006.00446.x

2. Sebba J, **Berridge D**, Luke N, Fletcher J, **Bell K**, Strand S, **Thomas S**, Sinclair I, O'Higgins A. (2015). *The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England*. Oxford: Rees Centre/Bristol: University of Bristol. https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/189623256/Educational_progress_looked_after_children_report_overview.pdf (Peer reviewed by advisory group and project funder).

3. **Berridge D.** (2017). The education of children in care: agency and resilience, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 77, 86–93. DOI:10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.04.004

4. Sinclair I, Luke N, **Berridge D.** (2019). Children in Care or in Need: educational progress at home and in Care, *Oxford Review of Education*, 45 (4), 443-460. DOI:10.1080/03054985.2019.1600488

5. **Berridge D,** Luke N, Sebba J, Strand S, Cartwright M, Staples E, McGrath-Lone L, Ward J, O'Higgins, A. (2020). *Children In Need and Children In Care: Educational attainment and progress*. Bristol: University of Bristol. http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/policybristol/briefings-and-reports-pdfs/Final%20Report%20Nuffield.pdf

Grant Details

i. **Berridge D.** and Sebba J. (Co-PIs). The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data, Nuffield Foundation, 2014-2015, GBP159,409

ii. **Berridge D.** and Luke N. (Co-PIs). The Educational Attainment and Progress of Children in Need and Children in Care, Nuffield Foundation, Sep 2017 - Oct 2020, GBP314,000

4. Details of the impact

Changed the narrative of policy makers

This body of research, exploring the relationship between educational outcomes and care histories, has 'changed the narrative' concerning the educational support and ambition of Children In Care (CIC). The Minister for Children and Families, Ed Timpson MP, speaking at the launch of the project overview report [2] said: '*… so often, the headline story is about the huge gap in attainment between children in care and those who aren't. It's as if the very fact of being in care is seen as the reason why looked after children underachieve. So, the report's findings that care can provide a protective factor, I believe, is significant in changing the nature of the debate'* [A].

An editorial in the professional journal Children & Young People Now stated '*…a landmark study…The Educational Progress of Looked After Children [2] blew apart the prevailing simplistic assumption that because the attainment of children in care is much poorer…the system is letting them down'* [B].

The change in narrative culminated in a commitment in the 2017 Conservative Party Election Manifesto: '*We will review support for Children in Need to understand why their outcomes are so poor and what more support they might require, in and out of school'*.

The results from this research, in particular the project overview report [2], were widely disseminated to policy makers, elected members, children's services managers and practitioners. We distributed some 5,000 free copies of a 35pp, high quality printed report; about 1,500 were downloaded online; there have been over 15,000 'hits' to the project websites; and over 40 presentations have been made to regional events.

Changes to policy and practice in England

The DfE note that '*the content of the 2015 report [2] helped identify critical policy questions'* [C]; and that the study's mixed methods approach also informed that used by the Children in Need review, which '*was able to think carefully about the review's approach to listening to children and young people that have needed social workers, having seen the approach taken by the Rees Centre/Bristol University'* [C].

i) Reporting and monitoring

As a result of the finding that time in Care might protect children educationally [2], from 2016 the DfE began to report on the educational outcomes of Children in Need alongside those of Children in Care. We liaise closely with relevant DfE analysts and our research is helping to inform policy options for the education of Children in Need, which to date have been absent [C].

The research also spurred the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) to launch its 2016 Changing the Narrative campaign. The President of ADCS made this his focus, building on the ADCS Educational Achievement of Children in Care strategy, which was based on the Bristol/Oxford research [D, E]. The success of the campaign led to the establishment of a new comprehensive online platform which helps all local authorities in England to track the educational progress of individual Children in Care: this used the research findings [2] to prioritise which information should be gathered and its classification, for example on school exclusions and placement moves [F]. This was produced by the National Consortium for Examination Results (NCER), funded by local authorities and DfE, in close liaison with Professor Berridge and Oxford research collaborators. The President of ADCS, said: '*The tool will enable local authorities to work with schools and Virtual School Heads to set ambitious but appropriate educational targets for cohorts and individuals in care, based on evidence that has previously not been available'.* The Chair of the ADCS Educational Achievement Policy Committee, said: '*This new tool will enable all those working with children in care to use a wide range of national comparators to set ambitious and accelerated but realistic educational targets, so that every child in care can be given the support they need to make a success of their education.'* [F]. All 150 top tier English local authorities now make considerable use of this service, running over 30,000 reports in 2019.

ii) Evaluation of achievement and progress

Following these developments, in 2018, Ofsted said '*We have taken the research findings [2] into careful account during the development of our new frameworks for inspection of local authority children's services…The framework's strong emphasis on the importance of good decision-making and achievement of timely permanence reflect the [report's] findings related to the age of entry into care and overall stability for children'* [G].

The results [2] also influenced Ofsted to shift from focusing on mainly the educational **attainment gap** between CIC and other pupils and instead to give more emphasis to **progress**; also giving less attention to year-on-year comparisons of different cohorts of children. In 2016 Ofsted organised large dissemination events in each of their eight regions focusing specifically on our research, which all of their Inspectors were expected to attend. Ofsted ensured that all Inspectors from Education and Social Care '*…were fully briefed on the key messages from the research. The research raised inspectors' insight into the varying and complex factors that are likely to make the most difference for children and has contributed to an increased level of scrutiny and awareness'* [G]. Because of changes in assessment methodology and GCSEs it is

difficult to provide evidence of children's progression in examination results from national and local statistics. However, a notable change is that permanent school exclusions for CIC nationally have reduced from 0.14% to 0.10% since the research was produced, bucking the trend for pupils overall which increased from 0.07% to 0.10% [H]. An important research finding was that permanent school exclusions are associated with lower educational attainments and progress.

Changes to local authority policy and practice

The research findings [2] are also being extensively used by local authority children's services [I]. The National Association of Virtual School Heads (for Children in Care) wrote that: '*for the first time as a professional group we were able to point to a compelling evidence base showing the likely consequences of key decisions for children in our care*' [I]. The research '*has had a demonstrable influence on frontline practice*'. For example, Hampshire County Council stated that '*We are taking account of the research findings in just about everything we do*' [I]. Hertfordshire Virtual School referred to links between the research and their model to improve the educational outcomes for Children in Need [I]. Barking and Dagenham highlighted among social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers the importance of supporting schools not to exclude pupils and emphasising schooling stability when placements change [I]. It is difficult to show how the research affects individual children, as there are numerous other influences and it raises ethical concerns. However, Staffordshire said that the research was cited to postpone the transfer of a boy to a school nearer to his new foster placement: he is making excellent progress at his current school and his birth family opposed the move [I].

Overall, the funder of the research – Education Director at the Nuffield Foundation, commented: '*What an incredibly positive impact story this is*', and '*… you and the team have been highly effective, both before and after the launch, in terms of engagement with key policy makers and influencers including DfE, Ofsted and ADCS*' [J].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

A. Minister for Children and Families (30/11/15). Speech: Children in care can achieve and succeed (published 02/12/15)

B. Children & Young People Now (Autumn 2016). Editor-in-Chief Introduction: Grounds for optimism despite a care system under pressure (*pg.3*).

C. DfE (29/07/19). Corroborating email: Team Leader, Children in Need and Social Work Analysis

D. The Guardian (12/01/17). President of ADCS - My hope for 2017: change people's view of the care system

E. ADCS, National Association of Virtual School Heads and National Consortium for Examination Results (NCER) (December 2015). Joint Policy Paper: The Educational Achievement of Children in Care (*cites [2]*).

F. ADCS (27/03/17) Press Release: Children Looked After Analysis Project

G. Ofsted (19/02/18). Corroborating email - Specialist Adviser Looked After Children

H. DfE (11/04/19). Outcomes for Looked After Children by Local Authorities in England, 31 March 2018 (*pg.22*).

I. Emails from Virtual School Heads and local authorities: Barking & Dagenham, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Salford, Staffordshire (Spring 2016)

J. Nuffield Foundation (February 2016). Corroborating email - Education Director